

Love Hina

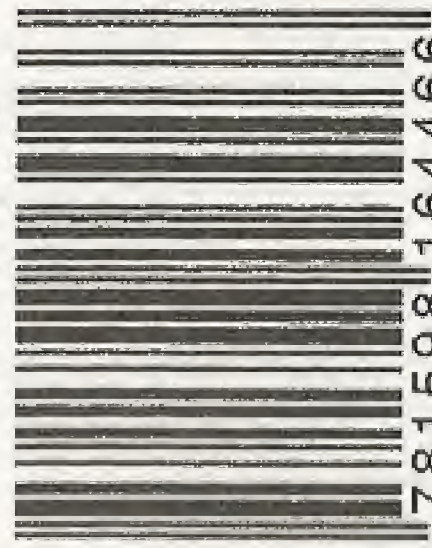
the novel



art by: **Ken Akamatsu**
written by: **Hiroyuki Kawasaki**

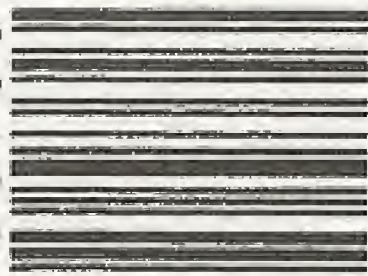
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ISBN 1598164465



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5 0 7 9 9



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Story by
Hiroyuki Kawasaki

Art by
Ken Akamatsu



HAMBURG // LONDON // LOS ANGELES // TOKYO

Love Hina: the novel 2
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ISBN: 1-59816-446-5

First TOKYOPOP printing: August 2006

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the USA

CONTENTS

PREFACE.....	7
PROLOGUE: MORNING AT THE HINATA HOUSE...	9
PART I: MECHANICAL PERVERT.....	25
Chapter 1: THE FORBIDDEN PLAY.....	27
Chapter 2: TEN FORBIDDEN SYLLABLES.....	45
Chapter 3: GONE WILD.....	61
Chapter 4: THE FINAL BATTLE AT THAT MEMORABLE PLACE.....	75
PART II: HOLIDAY NIGHT FOR THE STUDYING KNIGHT.....	93
Chapter 1: MOTOKO'S SECRET AND KITSUNE'S LIE.....	95
Chapter 2: THE LIVING SOULS EXCHANGE...	113
Chapter 3: MOTOKO'S BIG BLUNDER.....	129
Chapter 4: CRAZY KITSUNE.....	144
Chapter 5: LET'S GO PARTY!.....	161
Chapter 6: THE BIG GROUP CIRCLE.....	175
Chapter 7: BAYSIDE CHRISTMAS.....	185

Love Hina



KEITARO URASHIMA—

Tokyo University student and the Hinata House manager. Currently studying abroad in the United States.

ITSUNE KONNO—

Cute, feisty freeloader; loves alcohol and gambling. Room 205.

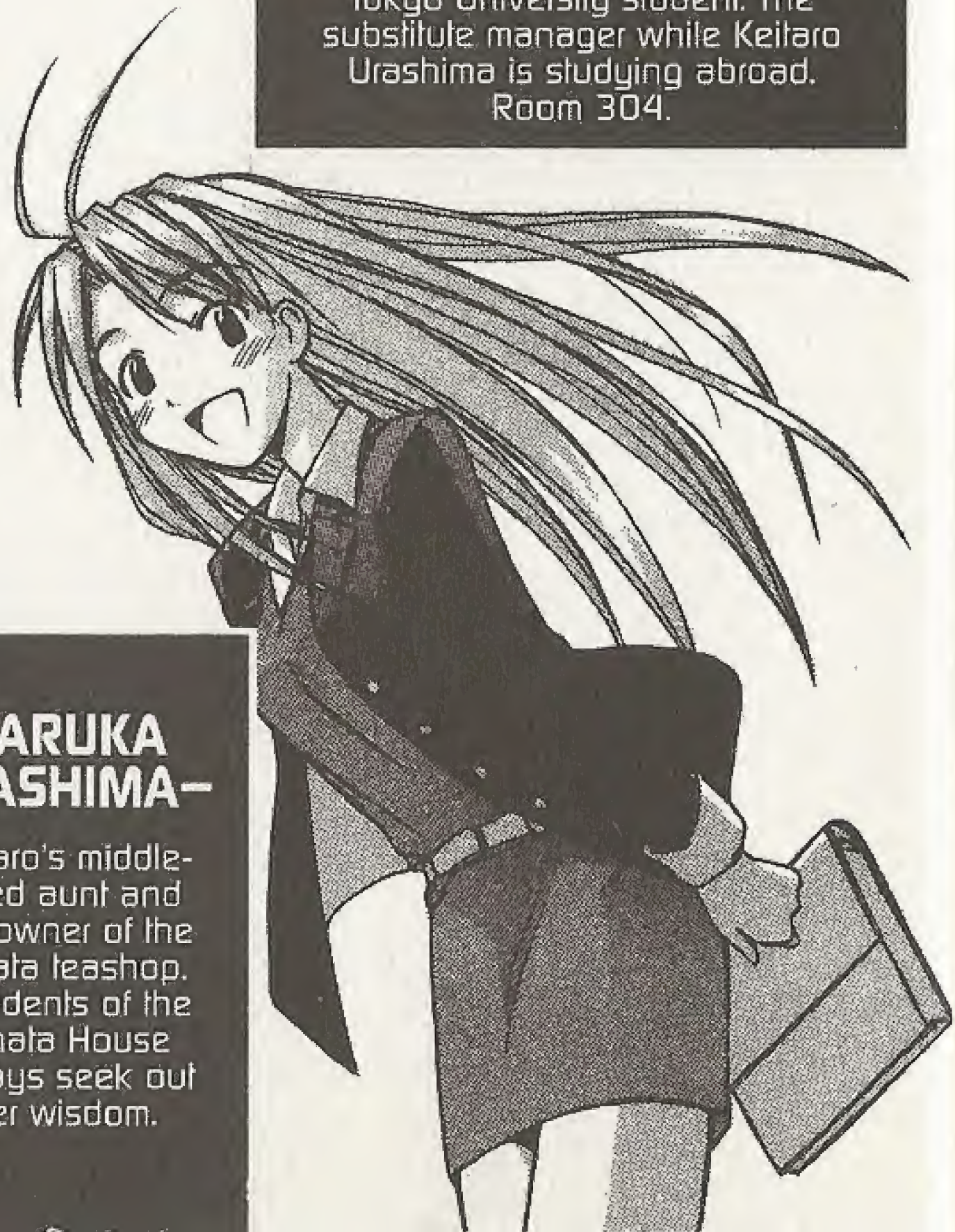


SHINOBU MAEHARA—

A shy, innocent, domestic engineer. Room 201.

NARU NARUSEGAWA—

Tokyo University student. The substitute manager while Keitaro Urashima is studying abroad. Room 304.



HARUKA URASHIMA—

Keitaro's middle-aged aunt and the owner of the Hinata leashop. Residents of the Hinata House always seek out her wisdom.



CHARACTER INFORMATION



MUTSUMI OTOHIME—

Tokyo University student. Live-in part-time worker at the teashop. Her personality is difficult to describe.



MOTOKO AOYAMA—

Daughter of a dojo owner; licensed sword master. Weak point: fear of turtles. Room 302.

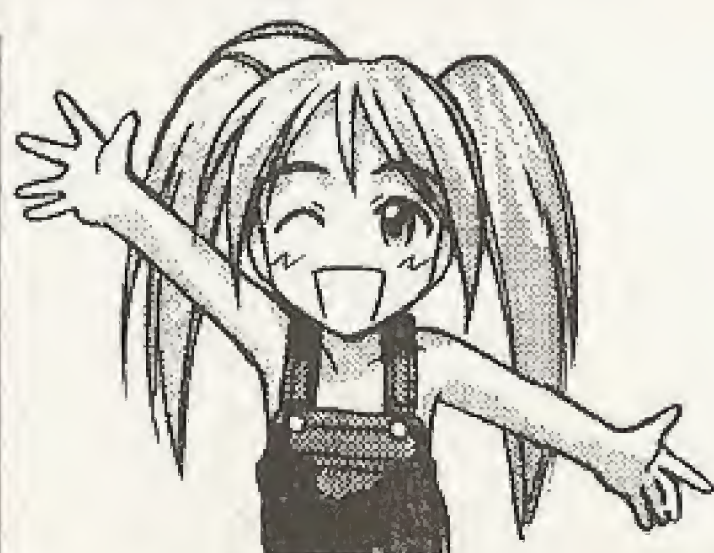


TSURUKO—

Motoko's older sister. Looks like a graceful Kyoto beauty at first, but her swordswoman skills and fiery temper exceed even Motoko's.

SUU KAOLLA—

A hyperactive, healthy young lady of an unknown nationality. Room 301.



SARA MACDOUGALL—

Felsty, rambunctious girl. Good partner for Suu.

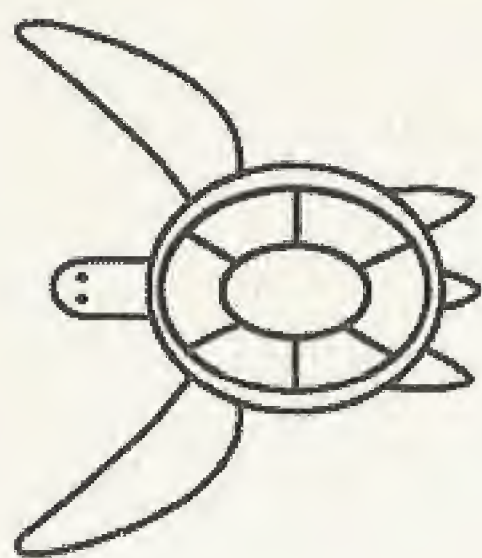


ONSEN TAMAGO—

Hot springs turtle that dwells in the Hinata House. His nickname is Tama.







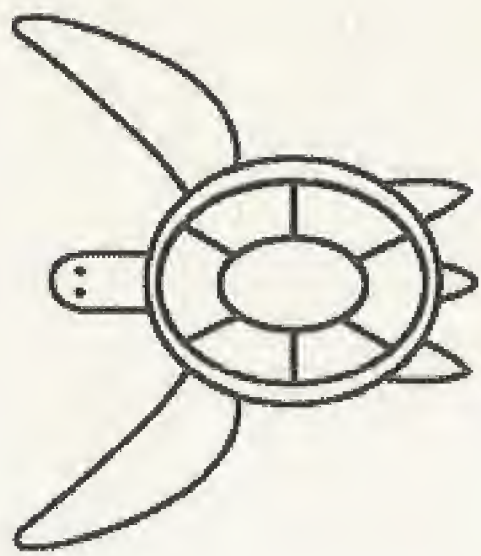
Preface

It has been several months since the first novel. I, Hiroyuki Kawasaki, have been offered the important role of writing the second novel.

The original manga series has already ended, which means the *Love Hina* world has concluded, but I tried to find stories to fit in between the gaps and avoid disrupting the natural flow of the original storyline.

When I was a child, whenever my favorite TV series ended, I was left with a sad feeling. (This was, of course, before VCRs were invented!) If the fans of *Love Hina*, still sad from the series' conclusion, would think of these chapters as, "I suppose this could have happened," it will give me the greatest pleasure.





Prologue

Morning at the Hinata House

It seemed like the town was always covered in fog. The town of Hinata, that is.

The scenic spot facing the Sagami Bay was a famous hot springs area—indeed, the town used to overflow with customers, from the end of the Taisho era to the beginning of the Showa era. But in the years following the Pacific War, fewer and fewer customers came. Barely any came at all these days.

Hinata City had been left behind by the times; the old, classic scenery remained untouched.

The antique streetcars still go downtown. The trolleys were all at least two generations old, and the now-rare three-wheeled cars still ran in the streets. The mixture of Western



and Japanese buildings that lined the roads gave the city a kind of mishmashed look.

Among these buildings, an old hot springs lodge peeked out atop a small mountain. Well . . . it *used* to be a hot springs lodge, way back when. Now it was a girl's dorm called the Hinata House. And its quaint appearance hid more weird stories than anyone could possibly imagine.

This morning the hot springs town was wrapped in silence. The fog hanging in the skies and the rising steam from the baths mixed together, absorbing the quiet pulse of the town.

The Hinata House, aglow with morning light, was also shrouded in this serenity, and stood proudly like an ancient guardian temple.

But suddenly, a loud shot pierced the silence. A moment later, signal flare from the new annex (which was separate from the Hinata House) exploded in the sky.

"Ow!" a girl screamed.

She slumped onto the ground, knocked down by the powerful recoil. It was Shinobu Maehara. She was a ninth grader. With big eyes and short, black hair, Shinobu still had an innocent, childish look about her. She had on cute teddy bear-print panties, too, which were visible when she plopped back on the ground.





Prologue

Shinobu sat there, flabbergasted, flailing her arms and legs in confusion. “Wa-ta-ta-ta!” she cried. When she finally calmed down, she called out, “Big trouble, everyone! Naru!”

No sooner had she spoken than she accidentally fired the flare gun again and jerked from the recoil, yelping, “Ow!”

She pranced around and eventually gasped, “Phew!” then collapsed onto her heels.

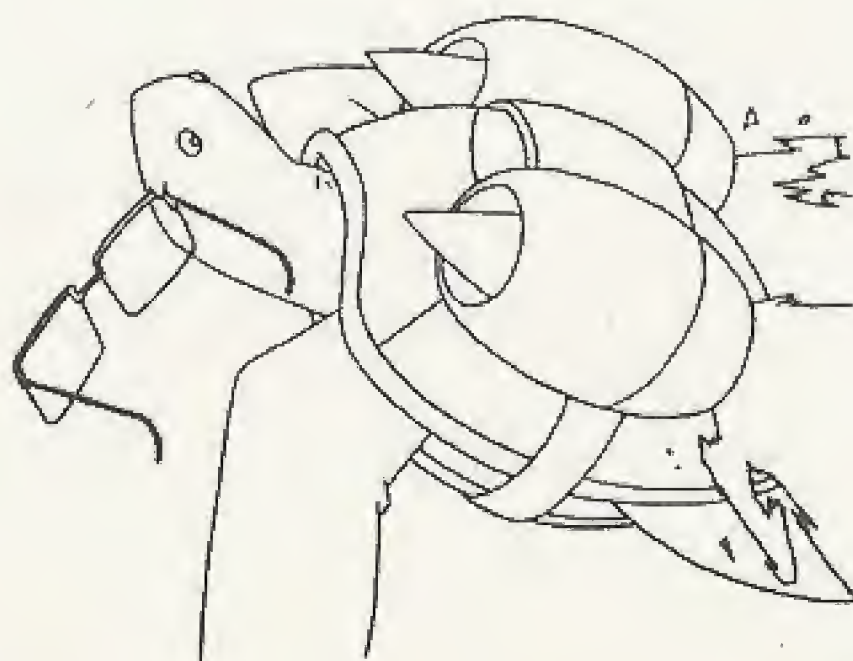
Flaming signal flare rounds landed all over the Hinata House estate. Smoke billowed everywhere.

A shadow squatting at the middle of the stairway started to stand. When the smoke finally cleared, the shadow was revealed to be . . . Naru Narusegawa herself.

“Wait for me, Keitaro! I’m on my way!” she called out.

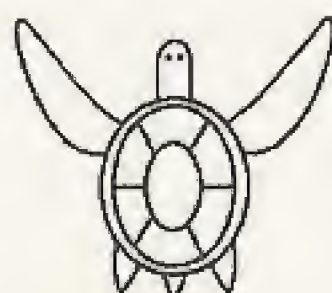
Naru seemed a little crazy as she clutched her suitcase and dashed down the stairs. She almost looked like a track athlete—she sure didn’t look like a Tokyo University student.

Yes, Naru was a Todai student. But, more importantly, she was absolutely gorgeous.



Naturally, some Todai students were pretty, and some of them could be quite athletic, also. But Naru was probably the only one that had both qualities in such quantity, and she also hailed from a former hot springs lodge turned all-girl dorm, so she was pretty exceptional.

Naru's heart was filled with the desire to reunite with a special someone dear to her. That envious young man's name was Keitaro Urashima.



"Did you know, if two people who love each other very much go to Tokyo University, they'll live happily ever after?" a little girl said to her playmate, a shy little boy.

"Really?" the boy replied.

~~Oops, not that far back! How silly to go all the way to the start of the series . . .~~

"Flight 521, which has been delayed for four hours, has now departed. We apologize for the inconvenience."

Once the airport announcement was made, Keitaro was no longer there. All that was left was one sheet of paper with "One free ticket for Keitaro to do whatever you ask him to do" written on it.



Prologue

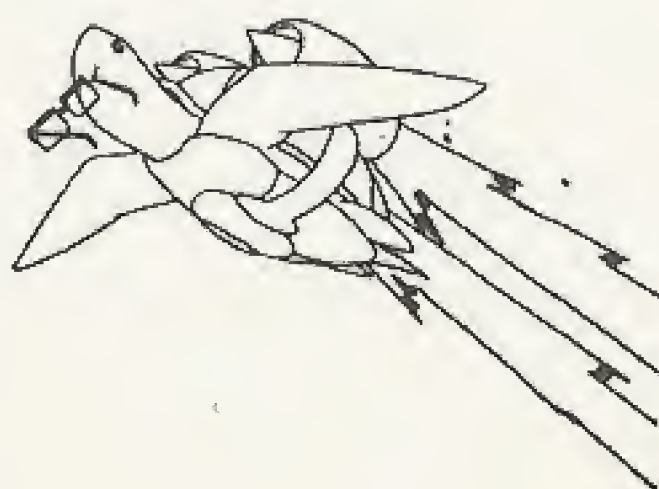
The previous spring, Keitaro's goal to become a Todai student had finally been achieved. But during the opening ceremony, he got injured, and could barely go to college. He wasted almost half a year. But as it happened, this period gave him time to get some perspective on his life. He decided to study abroad in the United States. That one free ticket was his way of thanking the residents when he left.

Naru had written "kiss" on that ticket.

Keitaro fulfilled that wish—which was not exactly a chore for him, since it was his wish, too. But since Naru was half-asleep at the time, it almost felt like a dream. When she awoke, Keitaro was no longer there—and his plane had already taken off.

Naru stood stock-still in the airport lobby and murmured, "Stupid." But that wasn't enough, so she ended up belting out "Stupid!" shamelessly in front of all those people. Still, she could only watch as the airplane twinkled into a speck, and then vanished from her line of sight . . .

Now that Keitaro was no longer at the Hinata House, the residents all reminisced about him.



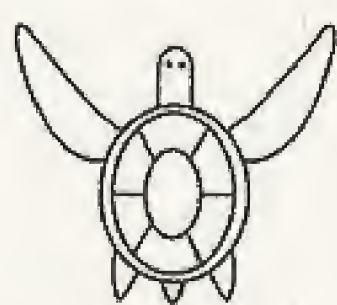
But not Naru. (Or so she liked to think.)

"He's probably doing fine, wherever he is," she said with a smile, and acted like she wasn't affected by Keitaro's absence. But she was just hiding her true feelings.

After he'd left, Naru started to lose it every two or three days. At first, people thought she was stressing out because, with Keitaro gone, she didn't have anyone to clobber, but that wasn't the reason. Well, it may have been a part of the reason, but mostly, suppressing her desire to reunite with Keitaro would reach its limit in a matter of two or three days.

Once those suppressed feelings peaked, it usually resulted in an incident like this morning. Basically, Naru kept trying to fly off to the United States, no matter what.

It was Shinobu's turn to keep her under surveillance, because it was about that time for Naru to go nuts again.



So, this morning at the Hinata House . . .

As Naru floated down the stairs like a breeze, a shadow swiftly blocked her path.

"Naru, please get a hold of yourself!"

"What a shame for you . . . To be so confused by such a clueless boy!" Motoko said. "By the power of my sword, I



Prologue

will destroy the evil spirits that must be troubling you, Naru. Now hold still."

"Don't try to stop me, Motoko!" Naru warned. "I—"

"No excuses!" Motoko attacked Naru. But suddenly . . .

"Myu!"

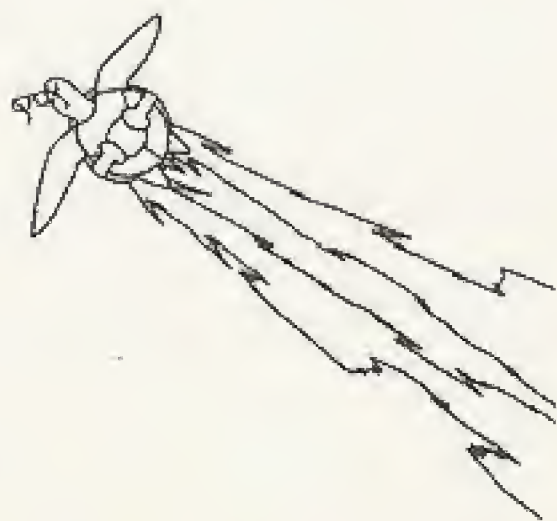
Tama, the hot springs turtle (and Hinata House's mascot), peeked out from behind Naru. Motoko went wobbly with sheer terror.

She stepped back, and Naru saw her chance to fly past. But as she did, the metal latch of the suitcase she carried somehow snagged the edge of Motoko's bath towel. Naru didn't notice and ran off. Of course the bath towel got yanked off Motoko's body, and . . .

"Eek!" Motoko squealed, now in just her birthday suit. She squatted down for cover.

"I'm sorry, Motoko!" Naru called out as she ran down the stairs.

Mitsune Konno appeared out of nowhere, blocking Naru's path. "I ain't letting you get any further!"



"Kitsune!" Naru gasped.

Mitsune's nickname was *Kitsune*, which meant fox, either because she looked foxy, or because she was cunning like a fox, or maybe both. Kitsune had many tricks up her sleeve. But like Keitaro always said, the price of being fooled by a fox like her was definitely worth it.

For some reason, Kitsune was clad in only a bath towel, too. "The manager shouldn't just leave her post like that!" she warned.

"I am not the manager!" Naru protested. "I'm just a substitute!"

"Same thing," Kitsune said insistently. "Whatever you are, if you leave, then my life won't be easy anymore. So you ain't leaving just yet!" Kitsune pulled an envelope from—well, not her sleeve, because she didn't have any, but rather from her towel-wrapped cleavage. She looked at Naru devilishly. "Besides, if you go, who knows what'll happen to this?"

Naru stopped. "What is that?" she asked warily.

Kitsune looked coy. "Oh, nothing . . ." she began. "Only a letter from Keitaro that just arrived yesterday from the States!"

Kitsune held the letter up with a flourish. Written on it was "To Narusegawa, from Keitaro."





Prologue

Naru stared, thunderstruck. Then she laughed skeptically. "Oh, no," she said, "I'm not falling for that."

"What?" Kitsune looked disappointed.

"Look carefully at the envelope," Naru said. Kitsune looked at it. Where it was supposed to have "To Narusegawa, from Keitaro" it instead had the words "To Narusegawa, from *Kagetaro*."

"Oh crap!" Kitsune hissed. "I was in such a hurry that I misspelled it."

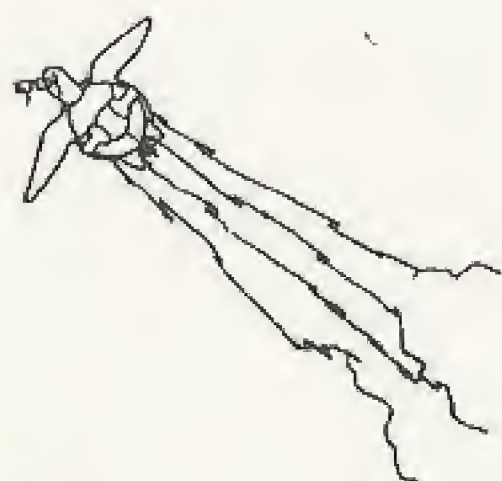
The letter was a fake. Naru glared at Kitsune with almost nuclear-level anger.

"Naru, don't be so mad," Kitsune said, smiling uneasily and backing up. "I was just kidding . . ."

"There are some things you just shouldn't lie about!" Naru growled.

A round of fierce explosions suddenly burst from overhead, blowing the two girls away.

Naru was okay, but Kitsune was almost naked—the bath towel was barely hanging on. "How dare you let a young lady



look like this before she even marries?!" she bellowed as she disappeared into the sky.

Naru somehow dodged the first round, but several more explosions came toward her like flaming monsters. There were only two people crazy enough to try such a dangerous feat to stop her. As Naru fled from the bursting rounds, she looked back to see two girls standing atop the main Hinata House roof.

"How 'bout it, Naru?! Do you like the power of this Turtle Bazooka I invented?" Suu Kaolla yelled exuberantly. She was a sophomore. She had tan skin, long arms and legs, and she too was clad only in a little white towel . . . She also had a machine that looked like a turtle shell strapped to her back. Mounted on the turtle shell was a bazooka, set on a turret.

Of course this might seem strange, but remember, this was the Hinata House. Suu's hobby was making crazy gadgets, and this was just another of her wacky inventions.

Someone else stood behind Suu, busily loading rounds. At first glance, it looked like a little boy, but upon closer inspection, it was an adorable little girl who looked like a tomboy . . . but she too was wearing only a towel. Her name was Sara MacDougall, and she was a fourth grader. Well, the paperwork hadn't been processed yet, so technically she'd start school in the spring.



Prologue

"How about that?!" Suu called out. "Are you having second thoughts about going to Keitaro now?"

Sara nudged Suu. "Let's finish it up," she said.

"Roger! Load it up!" Suu pointed at a round that looked like something out of a science fiction movie. It was an anti-Naru bazooka round. Only Suu knew what was so "anti-Naru" about it.

Sara tried to load the round into the bazooka, but then tilted her head and said, "Huh? It doesn't fit."

"Just jam it in really hard!" Suu ordered.

"Like this?" Sara pushed in the round.

KA-BOOM!

The round suddenly exploded and blasted the two girls into the sky. "Nah, that was a boo-boo!"

"It's all stupid Keitaro's fault!"

As the two girls rocketed far into the sky, two white towels floated to the ground.

Upon seeing the fireworks show, Naru ran out from the shadows to get away.



"Wait, Kei—" Naru began, but green vertical stripes suddenly filled her view. The next moment, a watermelon slammed into Naru's face.

"Oh dear, my hand slipped!" another girl said, smiling nonchalantly. It was Mutsumi Otohime, a Todai freshman now, but she had entered on her *third* attempt, so she was already twenty-two.

There's not much to say about Mutsumi. Her personality was just indescribable. Scientists ought to study her. Mutsumi was unpredictable; she had unnatural sensibilities. But her adorably cute looks usually caused most people to forgive everything she did.

Of course, Mutsumi was also clad in only a bath towel. Naru was frozen in place, a watermelon planted on her kisser like a big green-striped head.

But Mutsumi didn't seem to care. "If you were going to go see Urashima," she said, "I thought that maybe you should take a watermelon as a gift . . ."

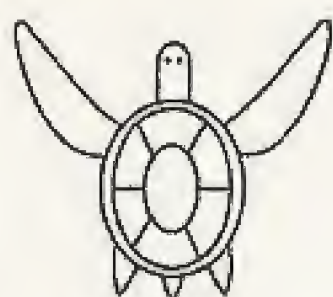
"Yee-oww . . ." Naru burbled. The watermelon fell from her face, trailing seeds and pink juice down her cheeks. Her eyes rolled back and she fell forward with a plop.

As Naru collapsed, she instinctively tried to grab onto to something to keep from falling. That something happened to be Mutsumi's towel.



Prologue

Naru went down. The towel went with her.
“Oh my.” Mutsumi chuckled, buck-naked.



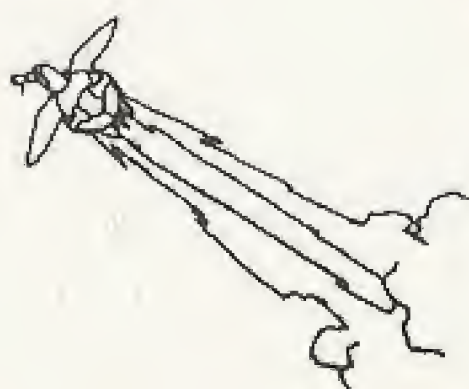
Unconscious, Naru was carried into the Hinata teashop by the conspiring residents.

Haruka Urashima, who ran the teashop, looked up apathetically, a cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth. “Again?” she said blithely.

The girls all nodded. Haruka noticed that, except for Naru and Shinobu, they were all wearing only skimpy towels. “I must’ve missed the fashion memo,” she muttered. “Why are you guys dressed like that?”

Kitsune answered. “It was Sunday and the weather was great, so we were taking a morning bath.”

“Then, Shinobu, who was on watch, let off the warning flares to signal that Naru was running away again . . .” Motoko added.



"I see." Haruka was somewhat satisfied with that explanation, but as she looked at the unconscious Naru, her brow furrowed with concern. "How long is she going to continue with this?"

"It's all because of that idiot!" said Sara.

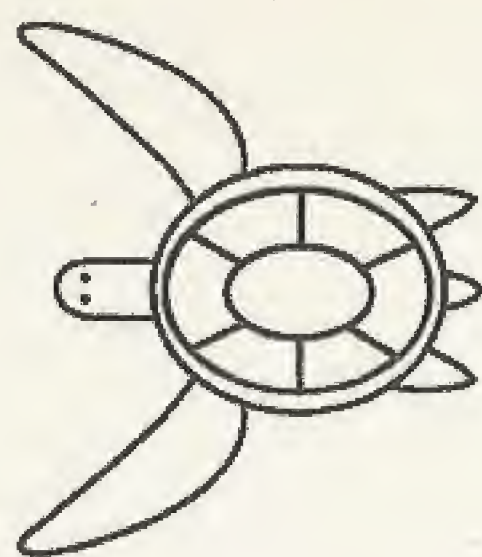
Suu agreed, saying, "Yeah, it's Keitaro's fault!"

"It's *not* his fault!" Shinobu defended.

Mutsumi pondered before adding, "But I kind of understand Naru's feelings."

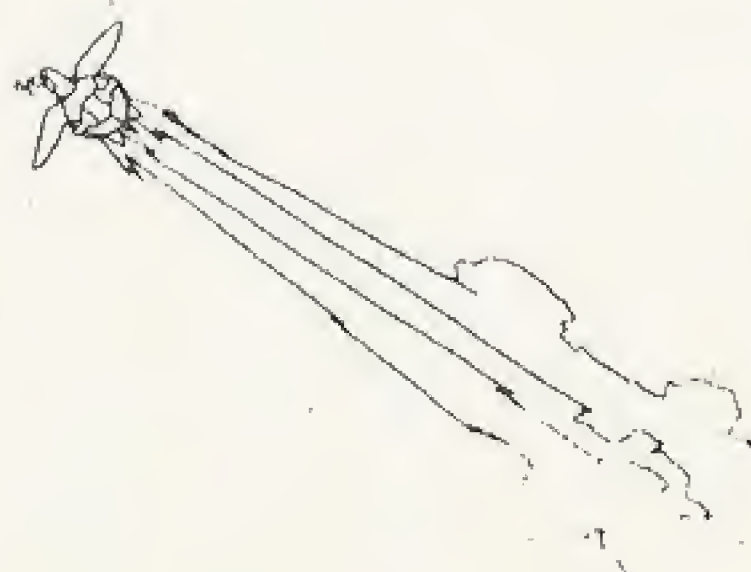
The residents of the Hinata House fell silent. Truth be told, everyone felt the same, more or less.



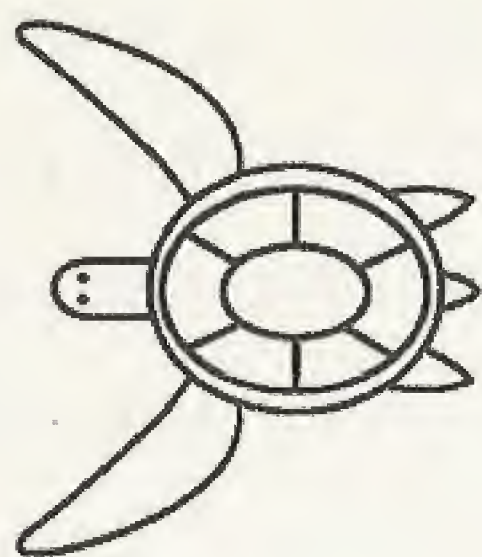


PART I:

MECHANICAL PERVERT







CHAPTER 1: THE FORBIDDEN PLAY

Naru's wild outbreaks stopped completely in December. The reason was simple.

"Naru, please help me again!" Shinobu, arms laden with study tools, wobbled into Naru's room.

"We'll study some more today, Shinobu," Naru said and smiled, just like she had done when Keitaro was there.

Shinobu was preparing to take the high school entrance exam, so Naru, the Todai student, was tutoring her. Once she took over what used to be Keitaro's task, she stopped going crazy.

But the Hinata House was still full of troubles, and it was not the greatest place to study.

Shinobu was not made for studying hard.



She hoped to get into the prefecture's top-ranked public school, M High, and that was really tough to do. So the extra-hard questions and problems caused her to bump into an emotional wall, making her teary-eyed. She whimpered, "I can't do this at all!" almost every day.

"Yes, you can," Naru would say, consoling her. "Even that doofus Keitaro made it into Todai."

Naru tried to comfort her, but instead, the tears grew larger and Shinobu bawled, "Urashima!"

Instead of being comforted, the mention of Shinobu's favorite tutor caused her to cry even more. This scene would repeat day in and day out, so Naru had a hard time tutoring.

At the same time, another of the Hinata House girls was also busy studying. Motoko was preparing for the college entrance exams, and that added to Naru's headache.

In Motoko's case, she didn't rely on Naru much and would study on her own, but upon closer inspection, she spent most of her time almost in a trance, scribbling strange kanji characters in her notebook. These strange characters were actually ancient symbols used for her family's *shin mei ryu* spiritual practices, but because at best they were proto-Japanese pictographs, they weren't exactly helpful.

Eventually, Motoko would come to. Then she would run outside, strip off her clothes, grab a bucket of water from the



well and splash it on her head. This would repeat day in and day out, so of course her studies didn't progress much.

"Motoko, aren't you bathing more often than you actually study?" Naru would ask. But whenever she said that, Motoko would be shocked, grab a dagger, and yell, "Sorry!" Then she would try to commit ritual suicide.

"Don't do it!" Naru would cry.

Where else in the world does a building manager so often have to prevent a resident's ritual suicide? But with no time to think of things like that, Naru just did her best to stop Motoko. She rarely had a chance to rest.

Kitsune and Mutsumi were definitely not people Naru could count on, either. Both of them were set in their own ways, and inevitably interrupted the others' study time, which was yet another cause for Naru's seemingly permanent headache.

Kitsune would guzzle alcohol during the day, fluctuate between hope and despair during horse races, and take midday naps under the sun. And any time she ran out of



money, she'd take a part-time job, living at her own pace.

"Study hard, Motoko and Shinobu," she would say cheerily. "I'm rooting for you guys!"

She probably meant that, but seeing as how those words came from the "queen of freeloaders," Motoko and Shinobu would, instead of getting motivated, do exactly the opposite.

If slacking off was a competition, initially Mutsumi tied with Kitsune. What was so strange was that Mutsumi was a Todai student, just like Keitaro and Naru, so Shinobu and Motoko really looked up to her. But when asked how she studied to get into college, Mutsumi replied, "Our family's traditional pencil rolling technique of finding answers," or, "turtle shell fortunetelling," so Shinobu and Motoko lost their will to study after hearing such nonsense.

Once, Naru cautioned, "No, Mutsumi. Don't say stuff like that. It's upsetting."

Mutsumi simply replied, "Oh my, I didn't notice that. By the way . . ."

Naru looked at her quizzically.

Mutsumi smiled. "Did you know that when you avoid the dark stripes of the watermelon when you slice it, you can't see the seeds?"

Naru just frowned. The inside of Mutsumi's head was harder to navigate than the Bermuda Triangle, and these and



other perplexing statements stuck in Naru's brain, which caused even more headaches.

Even so, the troubles caused by these girls weren't that bad. The biggest troublemakers by far were Suu and Sara. The playful pair would barge into the room and cause direct damage to everyone in their path. Sometimes the ruckus involved heavy machinery.

Today was a quiet afternoon at the Hinata House.

Kitsune jumped around, happy to have won some cash on her bets, and Mutsumi was at classes. Shinobu was doing unusually well, studying at a good pace. But after an hour had passed, an ominous vibration ran through the room.

"An earthquake?!" Naru asked in a serious tone.

Shinobu clung to her and whimpered, "Oh, help . . ."

Her words were cut off by the appearance of a humanoid robot, which suddenly broke up through the floor.

"Th-that's—!"

Shinobu recognized the face on the robot—specifically the three-eyed design and lips. It had the same face of the



machine previously used for Shinobu's first kiss practice, and the one that also stole Motoko's first kiss (though she never counted it as one), the "Kiss Practice Machine KRISHNA."

Of course, the original KRISHNA's bottom half was a tank, but this robot was different. Layered around a NASA-grade titanium frame were artificial muscles made of silicon, which were capable of conducting electric current, making it similar in form to a human's lower body. It was nuclear battery-powered, and its sensors categorized what it saw. This killer machine, programmed to regard all moving objects as the enemy, was called "INDRA" after the Hindu god of war.

There was only one person in the Hinata House who could make such a heinous creation. Well, one person in the *world*, really.

"Let's do it!" Suu jumped into the room, armed with a huge gun.

Sara, right behind her, was also heavily armed. "Show time!"

Naru's room turned into a war zone.

Heavy machine gun fire, laser beams, and grenades flew about. Naru and Shinobu feared for their lives as they dove to avoid the shrapnel.



Suu and Sara didn't so much as blink as they gleefully continued the battle.

"Aw! *Senpai!*" Shinobu cried, quivering. "Someone do something!"

A saving grace arrived: Motoko, unable to take the noise, came rushing in with a sword. "Die!"

She swung downward with her aura-filled blade, and with one slice INDRA split into two pieces and fell apart.

Suu blinked. "Drat, it's busted!"

Sara was irked and yelled, "Why'd you do that, Motoko?!"

"I'm studying!" Motoko bellowed, then composed herself. "Could you keep it down, please?"

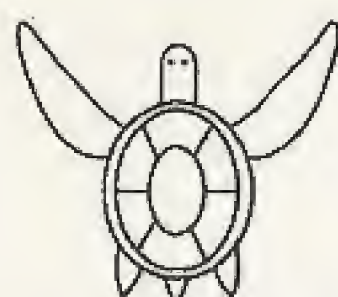
"Motoko is right," Naru said angrily. "If you want to play, do it outside!"

"Naru, why are you so pissed?" Suu asked.

"Just go play outside!" Naru stamped her foot.

Scolded, Suu and Sara picked up the smoldering remnants of the destroyed INDRA and slunk out of the room.





"This is boring," Suu complained as she munched on her favorite snack—bananas.

"Totally." Sara sulked.

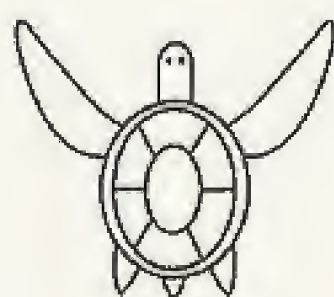
The two girls were a little restless. Up until recently, they could both yell "Keitaro, let's play!" and crash into his room to pull all sorts of mischievous stunts. Punches and kicks were the norm, but experimenting on him with various machines and clobbering him with newly unearthed artifacts was fun, as well.

But those good times were over, now that Keitaro was studying abroad.

"It's that idiot's fault for going overseas," Sara muttered.

Suu gobbled her banana and nodded. Suddenly, a bright idea flashed through her mind. "Hey! If Keitaro isn't here, then why don't we just make our own Keitaro?"

"That's the dumbest idea I ever heard," Suu said morosely as she looked at the remnants of INDRA. Then she smiled slyly.



A few days passed.



For a while, it was quite peaceful—one might say suspiciously so. Naru noticed that Suu and Sara in particular seemed unusually quiet.

Maybe I scolded them too harshly, she thought, so she decided to discuss it with Kitsune and Mutsumi in the Hinata House lobby.

“What do you think?”

“No way, that ain’t possible,” Kitsune said. “Suu and Sara won’t crawl into a shell and hide after a scolding or two, you know.”

Tama, who was hiding behind Naru’s legs, thought they were talking about him, so he asked, “Myu?”

Mutsumi replied, “Not you.”

“Myu myu?”

“Yes. It’s about Suu and Sara.”

Naru sighed. “What do you think, Mutsumi?”

“Oh my, I’m sorry. I wasn’t paying attention,” Mutsumi replied. “But those two should be fine. In fact, I saw both of them having fun today . . .”



According to Mutsumi's eyewitness account, Suu and Sara had sported big smiles on their faces as they shopped at the Hinata Do It Yourself store. "When I said hi to them, they asked weird questions," Mutsumi continued, nodding to herself.

"Weird questions?" Naru asked.

"They wanted me to talk about my memories with Urashima."

"They asked me that, too," Kitsune broke in, and added that Shinobu and Motoko were also asked to recount their memories with Keitaro. "They bugged me about it so much that I told them about all the stuff I did with Keitaro."

"Maybe they also felt lonely with him gone?" Naru wondered.

"Also? What do you mean by 'also,' Naru?" Kitsune looked offended. "Is there someone else who feels lonely without that idiot in our lives?"

"Ah . . ." Naru blushed. She had inadvertently let her feelings out. "W-well . . . like, Shinobu . . ."

Kitsune grinned viciously. "You sure? Naru, you're red as a tomato."

Flustered, she tried to change subjects by asking Mutsumi, "What were Suu and Sara shopping for?"

"Electronic parts, concrete, cement, all kinds of stuff."



She shrugged. "I was there to buy my special watermelon knife." Mutsumi suddenly whipped out a yard-long knife and pointed it at their faces.

Naru flinched.

Kitsune broke out in a cold sweat and stammered, "Th- that sword looks like something an ancient Chinese warrior would use!"

"It's not a sword, it's a cutting knife that you use like . . . this!" Mutsumi swung the large knife above her head, but suddenly froze in place and started to waver.

"What's wrong?!" asked Naru.

Sweat broke out on Mutsumi's smiling face. "Well, it was fine on the way up, but . . ." It appeared that her body locked up because she couldn't handle the weight of the huge knife. "What shall I do, Naru?"

"Don't come this way with that dangerous thing!"

"I-I'm sorry! I'm trying not to come this way but . . . my body isn't listening . . ."

"Hey! Don't come here!" Kitsune commanded.



Naru and Kitsune broke away from each other, as Mutsumi teetered left and right with the huge knife above her head. To an outsider, it looked like she was doing it on purpose or something. Eventually, Mutsumi's arms quivered so badly she pleaded, "Please, I can't hold it anymore . . ." and the knife swung down inches from Naru and Kitsune. Both of them shivered in fear.

In a life-or-death moment, a person's true personality shows. Kitsune grabbed Naru and used her as a human shield to protect herself.

The large, lethal-looking knife hovered centimeters over Naru's head, looming closer.

"Help!" Naru cried.

The big knife barely missed her by a hair as it sank deep into to the floor of the lobby.

Naru's entire body was frozen, rooted to the spot. Her cheek twitched. Severed strands of her hair wisped down to the floor.

"Oh my, that was close!" Kitsune said. "Naru, are you all right?"

Naru just stared, quivering.

"Naru, snap out of it!"

Suddenly Naru's ashen face flushed with anger. "I've had it with both of you!" she cried.



“Uh-oh, she’s pissed!” Kitsune said to Mutsumi. “Time to run!”

Kitsune and Mutsumi scrambled away from the scene. Fortunately for them, Naru couldn’t chase after them—right when she started to run, a hairline tear in her clothes split apart.

“Huh?” She gasped.

Naru, now in her underwear, shrieked. She immediately clenched her fist and said, “You pervert!” Then she threw out a powerful punch.

But of course Keitaro wasn’t there, so her punch met only air.

“Ah . . .” Naru’s eyes filled with tears, her eyelashes fluttered, and then she fainted. Minutes later, she came to, just like always.

Mutsumi and Kitsune were hiding behind a column, watching with great interest.

“Just like Pavlov’s dog,” Kitsune snickered.

“Is there a dog around here?” Mutsumi said, looking around. “Where is it?”



Kitsune rolled her eyes. "Duh, I meant that it was a learned behavior—a Pavlovian response."

" 'Learned behavior'?"

"You should know about this, since you're a Todai student. It's Doctor Pavlov's famous experiment."

"Yes, I know," Mutsumi said, somewhat defensively. "You ring a bell every time you feed a dog, so eventually the dog only has to hear the bell ring and the person gets the urge to feed the dog. That experiment, right?"

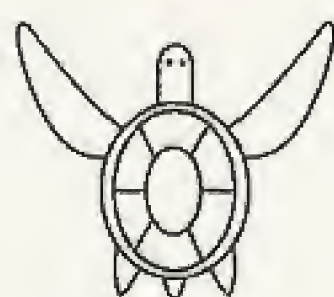
Kitsune looked at Mutsumi like she was nuts. "Yeah, close enough, I guess."

They both knew that anytime Naru was a victim of a perverted incident, she automatically assumed that Keitaro was the culprit and reacted with violence. It appeared that her body was now conditioned to do that.

"So, even if her brain doesn't think about him, her body remembers Keitaro," Kitsune said.

"Wow, that sounds a little kinky."

Naru just stood there. She couldn't forget Keitaro, after all, and she was dumbstruck by that realization.



That night, Naru had trouble going to sleep.



She thought that she had calmed down, but she was still in shock, and she missed Keitaro more than ever.

“Naru, are you still up?” Suu entered the room just as Naru got out of her futon.

“What brings you here this late?” Naru asked.

“I wanted to ask you something,” Suu said, in an unusually well-behaved way. Naru thought that Suu really missed Keitaro too, so she was prepared to recount her memories of the young man with nostalgia.

“You want to ask about Keitaro, right?”

“Yeah! Gee, Naru, how’d you know?” Suu asked, her eyes wide with surprise.

Naru took a deep breath and began to talk.

She and Keitaro had first met two years eariler in autumn. Technically speaking, it was October 19, 1998—after two years of failing the Todai entrance exams and studying for the third attempt, Keitaro was kicked out of his parents’ house and moved to his grandmother’s inn on that very day.

But his grandmother was on a trip around the world.



On top of that, the lodge had turned into an all-girl dorm . . . But he hadn't known about any of the that. He first encountered Naru in the hot springs—when they were both buck-naked—and then Keitaro ran into Kitsune and the other girls, and he was accused of being an exhibitionist and a pervert. It was a chaotic scene.

After that, Keitaro was mistaken for being a Todai student (of course, the fact that he didn't deny it only added to the problem) so they allowed him to stay at Hinata House as an exception to the girls-only rule. But of course, Keitaro's lie didn't last very long.

And so Keitaro was not only forced out of the Hinata House, but also banished from the town. Before he left, he tried to take a photo of himself in a photo booth, but Naru jumped in the picture as a joke. Fate played an even bigger trick that day, however.

His grandmother had sent a fax transferring all rights to the Hinata House to Keitaro, so instead of leaving, he became the dorm manager and lived under the same roof with Naru and the girls.

Suu smiled as she heard this part of the story.

"That's right," she said. "Keitaro was an exhibitionist and a pervert at first. I totally forgot about that! I need to input that later."



“Input?”

“Oh nothing,” Suu said, quickly changing the subject. “So, what next?” she asked, but Naru was stuck. So many things had happened since then . . . but amid all the day-to-day commotion, Keitaro and Naru had become close.

They hadn’t said they liked each other yet. There was still a bit of doubt. They even tried to kiss each other, but they were both so clumsy and had such bad timing that it never worked out . . . But Naru couldn’t possibly admit that.

“It’s really late, so we should continue this later,” Naru said.

“Roger! See ya,” Suu answered, without having any sort of fit at all as she left the room.

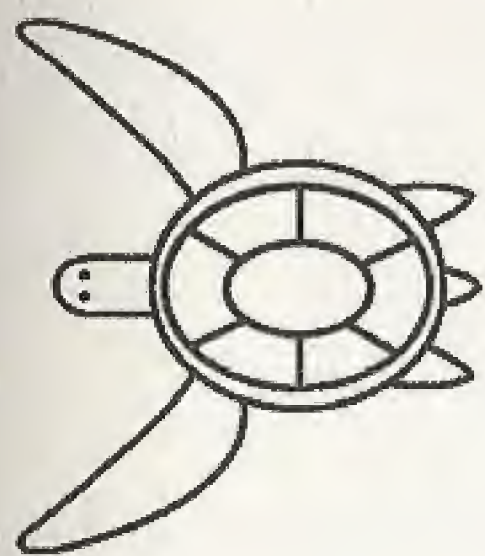
After talking about Keitaro, Naru had calmed down a bit, so she crawled back into her futon and started drifting off to sleep.

Just then, the door slid open slightly, and someone peered in. Naru, half-asleep, looked at the face and mumbled, “Who’s there . . . ?”



No one answered, and Naru drifted off again. Then the shadow in the doorway shifted slightly, its face illuminated by the light from the hall.

It was Keitaro, smiling.



CHAPTER 2: TEN FORBIDDEN SYLLABLES

Keitaro entered Naru's room.

He silently moved onto the futon, where Naru was asleep. Naru sensed something, but since she was half-asleep, she only whispered, "No . . ." and didn't resist.

Well, she could have resisted if she wanted to. But, somewhere in her heart, she may have wished for this to happen.

If it was a dream, it was a very good one. She enjoyed the intimacy. If it was really happening, then she was happy to see him. Either way, Naru was blissful. And she was ready to go all the way . . . so she clenched her eyes shut.

Keitaro's hand reached for Naru's pajama top, which was slightly open. Naru grabbed his hand. She wasn't resisting, but







rather was slightly afraid to move on. She wanted reassurance from his warmth.

But Keitaro's hand wasn't warm at all. And she couldn't hear his breath. What Naru felt was hard and cold, like touching metal.

"Eh . . . ?"

Naru woke up in surprise. What she saw was a Keitaro-like mechanical face.

"Eek!" Naru shrieked as she jumped up and scuttled back like a hermit crab running away from a predator. She accidentally bumped her head against a column behind her. "Ow . . ."

She crouched over in pain. Her pajamas opened up some more, but she couldn't think about that now.

Naru was frozen in shock. The Keitaro-thing that had crawled onto her futon suddenly made a rumbling engine sound, swiped the futon covers off, and headed straight toward Naru.

"Nooooo! Don't come near me!"



Prompted by Naru's screams, Kitsune, Motoko and Shinobu ran to her room.

"What's wrong, Naru?" Kitsune asked.

"Shinobu, turn the lights on!" Motoko ordered.

"Okay!" Shinobu turned on the overhead lights.

The Keitaro-thing was illuminated. Its eyes gleamed with artificial light and its face resembled Keitaro, but the silicon skin looked slick and unnatural. The right and left arms were uncolored manipulators, and the bottom half seemed more like a turtle. This rumbling mechanical monster was poised to attack Naru.

In the chaos, Shinobu glimpsed only the face. "Urashima!" she said lovingly.

Motoko, on the other hand, only saw the base. Her face screwed up in disgust. "A t-turtle?"

Kitsune was surprised but strangely calm about it. "What the hell is this machine?" she asked.

As the three girls scrambled for a better view, the mechanical monster approached a teary-eyed Naru. Naru yelled, "Noooo!"

At that moment, the machine stopped in its tracks, its rumbling engine going faint, then sputtering to a stop.

Naru's knees went weak and she collapsed to the ground.



Suu and Sara rushed into the room.

“Hey, it was here!” Sara squealed.

Suu looked vexed. “The source it was modeled after was stupid, so the mecha became stupid, too.”

The two girls busily checked their machine while Naru quivered in fear.

“Don’t tell me that you guys made that, Suu . . .” Naru trailed off.

Suu smiled gleefully. “Yup, I’m working on a new invention. I call it the Mecha Keitaro!”

Suu connected her laptop to the Mecha Keitaro and rebooted it. It whirred and clicked and then died again.

“Oops,” she said, her brow furrowing. “Mecha Keitaro was made from the destroyed parts of INDRA,” she confessed. “It’s still in the experimental phase.”

And with that, she gathered up all the junk and carried it into the Hinata cafeteria.



According to Suu, the problem was that the machine went berserk during one of their random tests. Of course, they might have had a chance to contain it if they hadn't been off raiding the refrigerator while the mecha ran its diagnostics.

"Just when we thought you guys had calmed down, you were making this . . . this . . . *thing!*" Naru said with a mixed reaction of surprise and disappointment.

Suu munched on some food and nodded. "Problem?" she asked.

Naru sighed. "Why did it come to me?" she grumbled.

"Well, you know," Kitsune pointed out, "even if it's a mecha, a Keitaro is a Keitaro."

"What do you mean?" Naru asked.

Kitsune rolled her eyes. "Ask yourself that same question."

"But it was about to do . . . it!" Naru said.

"Yeah, right." Kitsune ignored Naru's flustered outrage and turned to Suu and Sara. "So the reason why you asked about our memories of Keitaro was to gather data for this mecha, right?"

"Right on the money, Kitsune," Suu replied. "Mecha Keitaro's electronic brain is filled with Keitaro's real data. Anyhow, look at this."

Suu typed commands into the laptop that was connected to Mecha Keitaro. It moved and made bizarre clanking noises.



Its eyes lit up, and it started toward Naru again.

Naru blinked in bewilderment. After a few steps, Mecha Keitaro went weak and almost fell forward. When it tried to brace itself by reaching out with its right and left manipulators, they snagged Naru's pajamas.

"Huh?!" Naru cried.

The pajamas buttons snapped off and Naru's breasts were exposed. The veins in Naru's forehead pulsed as she hollered, "What are you doing, you pervert?!"

Naru's fist landed in Mecha Keitaro's face. Mecha Keitaro was blown away.

Motoko attempted to dodge, hiding behind a column, but the Keitaro-thing tottered toward her and then accidentally stuck its face into her cleavage.

"Yikes!" Motoko squirmed. Not only did Mecha Keitaro come in contact with her breasts, but because its bottom half resembled a turtle, she really disliked the entire situation. Motoko lost it and grabbed up a bamboo sword, yelling, "Die, once and for all!"

She swung the bamboo sword laced with her aura and blasted Mecha Keitaro away. The machine was thrown headfirst into the wall. The wall crumbled to the ground.

"See?" Suu said. "It acts just like the real Keitaro!"

Tears sparkled in Shinobu's eyes. "Urashima doesn't do that!" she said defensively.

"What are you talking about, Shinobu?" Kitsune snickered. "He's exactly like that!" She mimed big grabby hands.

"No, he's not!" Shinobu cried.

But the person who wanted to just break down and sob was actually . . . Naru. To think that she took this outrageous mecha seriously for even a moment was embarrassing for a woman . . .

Motoko took Shinobu aside to comfort her. They huddled in the cafeteria entrance.

Kitsune turned to the mecha's creator. "Suu?"

"What?"

"Whether it looks like Keitaro or not is beside the point, but can't you do anything about the lower body?"

Suu looked at her quizzically. "Lower body, like here?"

She thumped the mounted circuit component. Mecha Keitaro suddenly made a dull clanking sound, and an odd weapon came out from between its forelegs.



It definitely looked indecent.

“Oh . . .” Shinobu was so shocked by the sight that she fainted.

Motoko blushed and stuttered, “S-stop it!”

“Wow,” Kitsune said, winking. “Who says size doesn’t matter?!”

Naru turned beet-red. “Keitaro’s doesn’t look like that!” she blurted. The other girls looked at her, and she turned redder still. But despite its questionable appearance, Suu and Sara didn’t realize the implications of such a device.

“Look, we just added a plasma launcher on the lower body,” Sara told them. “This will beat anyone in one shot!”

Suu nodded. “Wanna see something even crazier?” Before the other girls could answer, she typed a series of commands into the laptop.

Fearing that the mecha might morph into something even filthier, Naru tried to stop Suu. “Wait! That’s enough—” she began.

But Mecha Keitaro’s eyes flashed.



From the internal speaker, a tinny voice came out. "Hi, I'm K-Keitaro."

Naru froze when she heard its voice. The sobbing Shinobu, the blushing Motoko, and the grinning Kitsune all looked at Mecha Keitaro in surprise.

Mecha Keitaro's artificial voice was a little canned, but otherwise sounded almost exactly like the real Keitaro. It sounded so much like the real person that Tama, who had been watching cautiously from a distance, happily flew over and slapped Mecha Keitaro on the shoulder with its flipper. "Myu myu!"

Suu saw the surprised looks on Naru's and the other girls' faces and proudly boasted, "See? Doesn't it sound just like Keitaro? I invented the artificial sound synthesizer. And that's not all. Watch this . . ."

Sara typed on the laptop.

Mecha Keitaro announced, "I, Keitaro, vow allegiance to Suu and Sara . . . and I am a stupid T-Todai student!"

"He doesn't say that!" Shinobu retorted. But she sort of agreed. "Still, it does really sound like him."

Even Kitsune and Motoko couldn't help but nod.

"It sure sounds like Keitaro," Motoko said. "Especially the pathetic, sniveling tone."

Kitsune nodded and shivered.

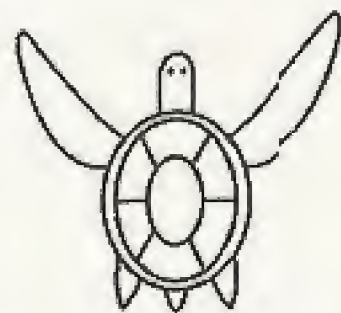


Even Naru had to agree. “Yeah, it sounds like him,” she confessed sadly.

Suu and Sara smiled. “It’s about time you realized how cool this mecha is,” Sara said.

“Yeah, way too late.” Suu nodded and typed in more commands. Mecha Keitaro whirred, and the plasma beam launcher raised and waved around, pulsing a vibrant, glowing crimson.

The girls all groaned. “We don’t need to see *that!*” Naru hollered.



Before they knew it, morning came.

Mecha Keitaro had been left in the Hinata House cafeteria. After all that commotion, Suu and Sara became sleepy, abandoned Mecha Keitaro where it was, and returned to their rooms. With all the excitement the night before, the girls slept in later than usual. Everyone but Naru, anyway.



Downstairs, she quietly entered the cafeteria. Naru opened the door slightly to check the inside of the room, then slipped inside. She went to Mecha Keitaro and turned on the laptop. On the display, Mecha Keitaro's operating system booted up. Naru clicked on the "Voice Input" icon. Moments later, the screen displayed the standby mode for voice input.

Naru typed in one letter at a time, the click of the keys sounding deafening in the empty room.

I-L-O-U-E-Y-O-U.

Naru hesitated, then hit the delete key. "Well, it doesn't look like him," she muttered, "but at least it sounds like him."

She typed again.

I-L-O-U-E-N-A-R-U-S-E-G-A-W-A.

Naru sighed and clicked on the "Execute" key. A data upload window showed on the screen.

Naru was a bit excited. Mecha Keitaro looked peculiar, but it sounded exactly like the real boy. She felt silly and more than a little embarrassed, but she waited for the machine to say the words that she longed to hear.

But Mecha Keitaro didn't respond at all. The upload window didn't progress. Naru sighed, frustrated. "Gosh, what's wrong with this thing?" she complained.



She tapped Mecha Keitaro's rubbery head. Just then, another voice entirely said, "Oh my, that's a nice sound."

Mecha Keitaro sounded just like Mutsumi. Naru was taken aback. The voice came again.

"It's sounds ripe, so I'll slice it for you."

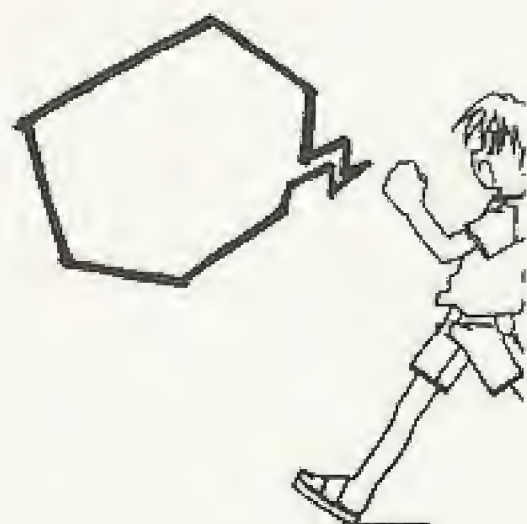
Suddenly Naru heard Mutsumi's voice from behind. When she turned around, she saw a large blade about to swing down into her face.

"Yikes!" Naru jumped away. The knife stabbed into the floor just inches from where she had stood. "M-Mutsumi!"

Naru kept calling out desperately, but Mutsumi didn't respond because she was sleepwalking. She innocently snored away while gripping the large knife in her hand. The strange girl had walked in her sleep from her second-story room in the Hinata teashop all the way to the cafeteria.

When Naru had tapped Mecha Keitaro's head, Mutsumi'd thought it was the sound of thumping a fresh watermelon and tried to slice it. She was a very dangerous sleepwalker indeed.

"Please wake up, Mutsumi!" Naru yelled.



Mutsumi finally came to. "Oh, what was I doing, hm?" When she saw Mecha Keitaro, she smiled and asked, "Urashima, when did you come back?"

She even bowed, thinking that it was the real Keitaro. Naru groaned. Even if Mutsumi had been completely awake, she would have been this ditsy.

"Mutsumi, that's not Keitaro!" Naru said.

Mutsumi blinked groggily. "Oh my. Naru, good morning."

Naru explained to the pleasantly smiling Mutsumi what had just happened.

Mutsumi finally understood and stared at Mecha Keitaro out of curiosity. Then for no reason she said, "Eek!" and pushed the laptop's OFF button.

"Ah!" Naru gasped. She didn't know much about computers, but she did know that it wasn't good to turn off a computer while it was running. "I wonder if it's okay . . ."

Naru fussed over Mecha Keitaro while Mutsumi tilted her head and pondered, "I pushed the button, but it's not moving."

Mutsumi had assumed that it wasn't on in the first place. Naru tried to turn the computer on again. The screen displayed Mecha Keitaro's OS. She sighed in relief; at least the system didn't crash.

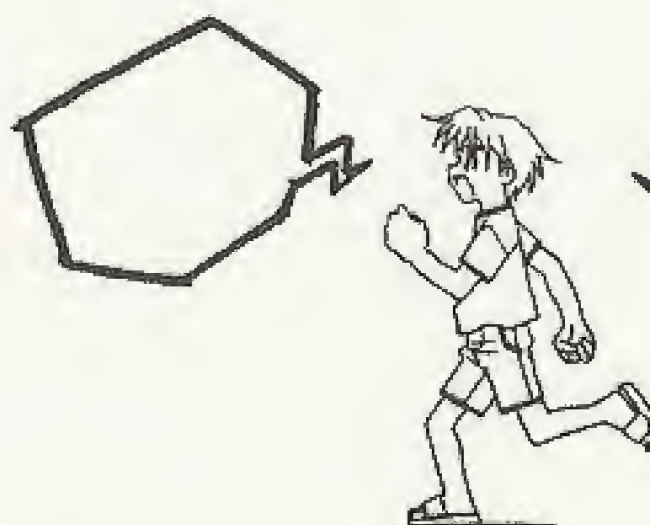


“Shoot, I think the voice input is deleted,” she said.

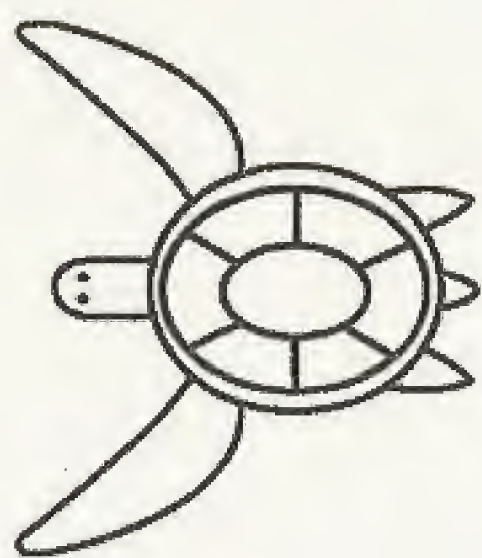
“Come again?” Mutsumi asked.

“Nothing—I’m just talking to myself.” Naru was disappointed, but somewhat relieved, also. She realized that she should hear those words from the actual person, if she ever were to hear them at all.

Naru turned off the computer.







CHAPTER 3: GONE WILD

Several nights later, Naru was in the Hinata House hot springs.

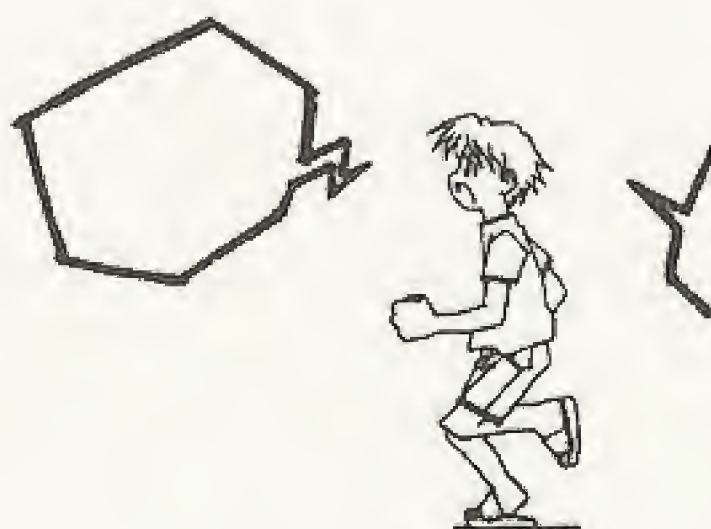
“Mm, this feels nice . . .” she cooed. She was neck-deep in the soothing water, completely relaxed.

The hot liquid warmed her body to the core. It helped her mind and body unwind. Naru spread both her arms and legs. It wasn’t ladylike at all, but she didn’t care. There was no one else around.

But between her spread legs, bubbles floated up and broke at the surface.

“Huh . . . ?”

She hadn’t farted . . . Naru had no idea where the bubbles came from.



"What's going on?" Naru wondered.

Just then, a large column of frothing water shot up.

"Eek!"

Mecha Keitaro's head suddenly surfaced, grinning.

The veins in Naru's forehead pulsed. "What are you doing here, you creep?!" She punched Mecha Keitaro powerfully out of reflex. But this time, Mecha Keitaro emitted a force shield to block Naru's fist.

"Eh?"

Naru noticed too late, and she accidentally touched the force shield. The next moment a powerful surge of energy splintered down Naru's arm. "Owwwww!"

Naru's body sparked while she screamed.

~~If this were an old cartoon, her skeleton would have shown through from the inside.~~ Naru was burnt to a crisp, smoke streaming out her ears as she fell face-forward into the hot water.

Suu ran in. "Hey, it's here!"

Sara arrived right behind her, then noticed Naru floating in the water. "He got one!" she exclaimed, then peered closer at Naru. "Is she dead?"

Naru recovered, sputtering and splashing. "I'm not dead!" she bellowed. "What the heck are you guys up to this time?"



“Nothing,” Suu said. “Mecha Keitaro moved on its own.” Suu and Sara both nodded earnestly.

They convinced Naru, but a new question surfaced.

“We don’t know why it did this,” Suu said. “Maybe the brain has some sort of bug.”

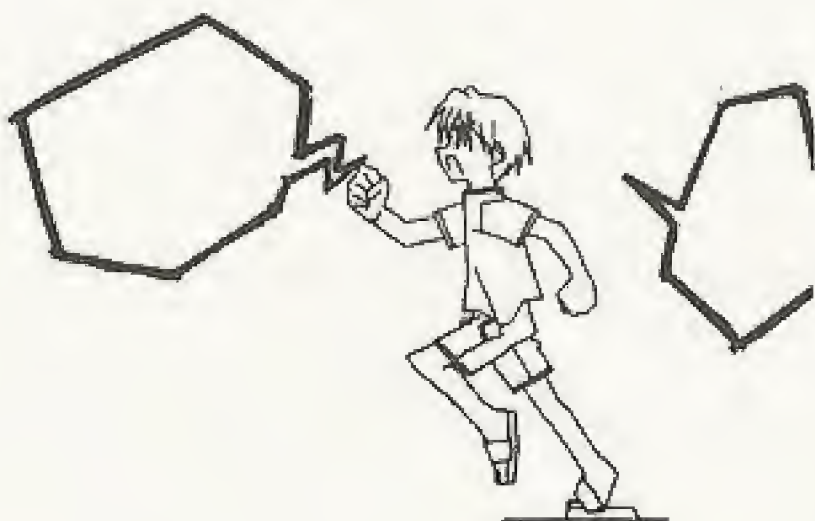
Then, Mecha Keitaro made some electrical clicking sounds and looked at Naru. Its voice hiccupped, “I . . . L . . . LO . . . VE . . . VE . . . VE . . .”

Suu and Sara were bewildered. “It spoke!” they said in unison.

Suu scratched her head. “Why, though?” she said. “We didn’t type in any voice commands.”

Naru felt a chill run down her spine. It wasn’t because she was completely naked. Well, maybe a little. But her shock caused the real shivers.

“Don’t tell me it said ‘I love . . .’ ” she began, then stopped. She couldn’t finish the sentence. She suddenly realized that the voice commands she had typed in days before weren’t deleted after all. When Mutsumi forced the



computer to shut down, Naru's data had become like a bug in the system.

Suu switched on her remote control and tried to turn off Mecha Keitaro. "Drat!" she said. "It won't listen to my commands."

Mecha Keitaro bobbed in the water, whirring and clicking. "I . . . LO . . . VE . . . I . . . LO . . . VE . . . I . . . LO . . . VE . . ." It was pronouncing the words Naru had typed in more clearly now.

Naru grabbed Mecha Keitaro's head, trying to put her hands over its mouth. "No!"

She couldn't let anyone hear something so embarrassing, and she sure didn't want anyone to know that she had tried to make Mecha Keitaro say that, either.

"Don't, Naru!" Suu cried. But just as Suu shouted her warning, something glistened between Mecha Keitaro's legs.

"Eh?"

The clanging metallic sound indicated that the plasma beam launcher in the crotch area had been turned to attack mode. Shiny atomic particles concentrated in the center of the muzzle, glowing red.

PWEEEM!

A ring of beaming light shot out of the cannon; it looked like something out of an old sci-fi movie. It was



extremely powerful—it completely vaporized a rock in the hot springs.

The girls all dove for cover as the charger turned and whirred.

“Yikes! Is it recharging?” Naru asked.

“It doesn’t have to!” Suu replied. “It can shoot continuously!”

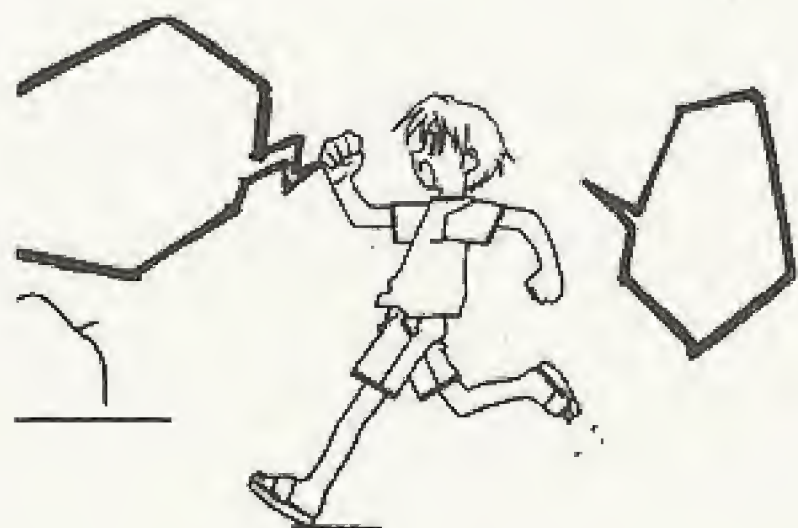
As if demonstrating, the plasma cannon went *PWEEEM! PWEEEM! PWEEEM!* It fired in rapid succession, frying random trees, rocks, a wooden bench . . . The girls scrambled away from the vicious, if not exactly accurate, attack.

“Suu, why’d you put a real weapon on that thing?!” Naru yelled.

“We thought it’d be cool or something!” Sara said.

“We put the weapon on it,” Suu added, “but we also programmed it so that it considers everything in sight to be its enemy.”

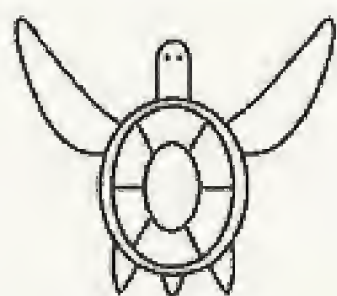
“What?!” Naru yowled. “Then what the heck are we supposed to do about it?”



"Run, I think!" Suu cried. "We can only run away at the moment!"

Mecha Keitaro whirled, a cheesy grin on its face. The plasma cannon glowed.

The three girls barely made it out of the hot springs unscathed.



Back inside, Naru threw on some clothes and then stormed into Suu's room.

Inside were new weapons such as heavy machine guns and grenade launchers, and also the usual weapons, like a Panzer Faust and some pineapple grenades. They were all lined up in neat rows, like an armory stock shelf. Naru was furious.

"Are you nuts?" she said. "That thing could zap us all!"

"Well, my bad, I guess," Suu mumbled. Her back was toward Naru, but she sounded really serious.

"Well, duh!" Naru said. "What are we going to do about this?"

Suu turned. "I feel bad for Mecha Keitaro, but we need to fight back. I'm sad, but a scientist needs to take responsibility." She looked at Sara. "Let's go!"



Sara grinned. "All right!" she said. "For the future of science!"

Suu and Sara grabbed weapons. They had huge smiles on their faces. It had been a while since they were allowed to let loose, so they were elated.

Naru nodded. "Count me in, I guess. As manager of Hinata House, I have a responsibility to protect the residents." While that wasn't exactly a lie, she really just wanted to destroy Mecha Keitaro before it uttered those embarrassing words in front of someone.

"Look at this." Suu showed them another machine she was working on. It was a portable radar unit. The Hinata House and the surrounding structures were shown on the screen and a red, blinking dot indicated Mecha Keitaro's position.

"What is that?" Naru asked. She pointed at four blue dots going toward the red dot.

"Blue dots are life forms." Suu explained.

"Life forms . . . Don't tell me!"



Shinobu, Kitsune, Motoko, and Mutsumi were going to the hot springs to bathe together, totally clueless.

Naru grabbed whatever weapon she could find and said, "Let's go save them!"

"Time for war!" Suu shouted.

"Yeah!" Sara joined in.

The three girls headed toward the hot springs. But it was already too late.

Shinobu's and Mutsumi's eyes were glazed over. Motoko was frozen in place, still holding a sword—she probably had an allergic reaction to the mecha's turtle-like lower body. Kitsune was swinging from a branch on a nearby tree, a victim of Mecha Keitaro's attacks.

"Sara, help everyone out!" Naru said. "Suu, where is Mecha Keitaro?"

"It ain't here no more." Suu answered, and by way of proof she showed Naru the portable radar. On the screen, the red dot was moving around inside the Hinata House.

"What's he doing?" Naru asked, looking perplexed. "That's not a hallway."

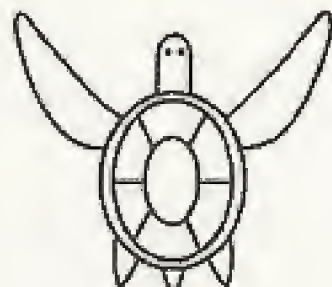
"It doesn't need one," Suu said. "Mecha Keitaro is using the secret passages throughout the building to move about."

But as they watched the screen the red dot suddenly disappeared.



“Drat!” Suu hissed. “There’s too many obstacles blocking the radar signals.”

And so, Mecha Keitaro’s whereabouts were now unknown.



Fortunately, the crew soon recovered from the attack. It was already past ten o’clock, and the Hinata House was eerily silent. Naru and the girls gathered in the cafeteria to discuss their options.

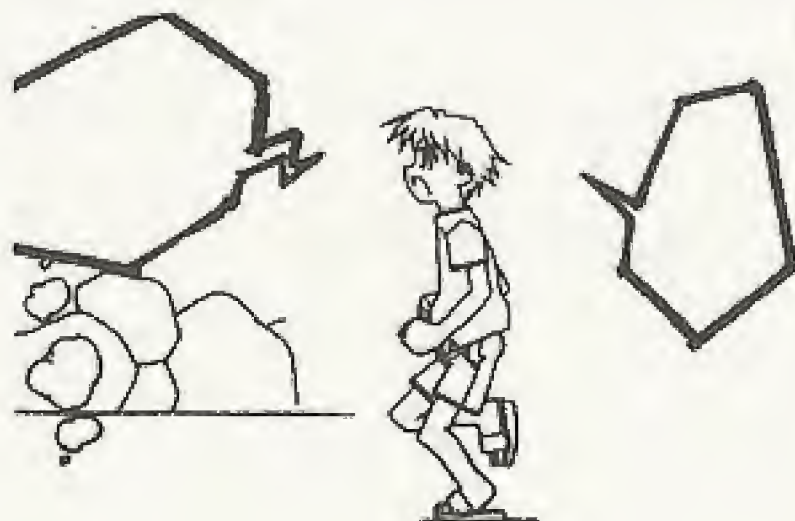
Motoko held her sword tightly. “We must take care of it as soon as possible.”

Everyone agreed. But they’d reached a dead end.

“So, how do we do that?” Shinobu asked.

Suu and Sara had a clear plan. “We fight!” they said. “Fight for freedom and peace!”

Okay, so maybe it wasn’t much of a plan. Kitsune easily shot the two girls down.



"Wait up. That thing's so strong it kicked our butts," she said. "You guys and Naru are the violent types, so that's fine, but what about the weak and helpless ones, like me?"

Suu and Sara took offense. "What a nice compliment," Sara said.

Suu added, "We're not violent, just enthusiastic."

"Totally," Sara said, and nodded.

"Excuse me," Naru interrupted, also feeling defensive. "Exactly how am I violent?!"

Mutsumi snorted. "Oh please, Naru, don't get us started." She mimed a Naru Punch, and the other girls giggled.

Naru slumped her shoulders.

Motoko also objected, for what it was worth. "She's not violent, just strong . . . More to the point, I regret that I cannot defeat Mecha Keitaro." Motoko shuddered at the image of Mecha Keitaro's lower body. "It's too . . . icky."

"Besides, we don't even know where Mecha Keitaro is, right?" Naru pointed out. "We can't fight it if we don't know its whereabouts."

"We can if we bait him . . ." Sara responded.

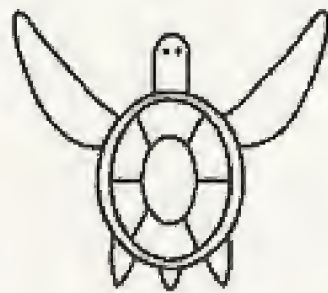
The others looked at her. They all murmured, "Bait?"

"If there's something he likes, then we use that as bait to trap him."



“That’s it!” Kitsune yelled. The word ‘bait’ triggered her trickster brain into scheming. “I’ve got a great idea!”

Kitsune gathered everyone and whispered her plan on how to defeat Mecha Keitaro.

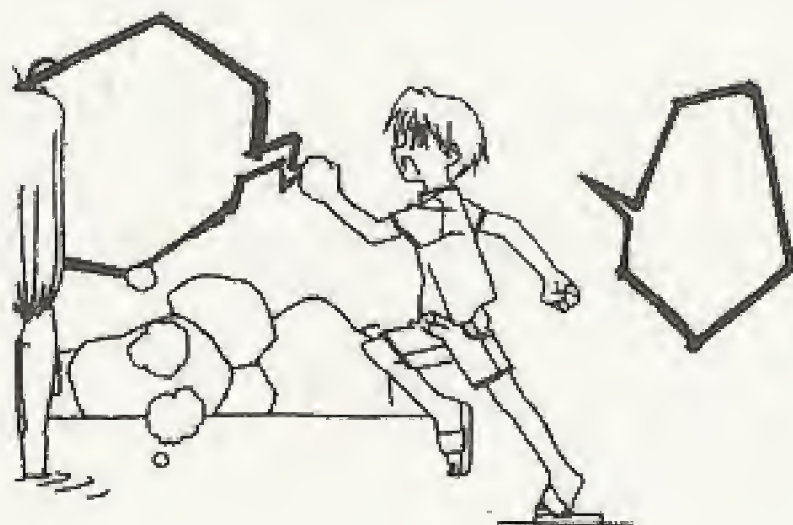


The operation would begin at eleven forty-five. The chosen location was the area between the stairs and front entrance of the Hinata House, the better to minimize damage.

The girls split into two teams. The first was the violent team . . . or at least the team with the most firepower. Naru, Suu, and Sara were selected for that.

Motoko, the shin mei ryu expert swordswoman, usually would have been included in the fight, but since the turtle-like lower body of Mecha Keitaro creeped her out (and reduced her strength significantly), she was not on the violent team.

Naru’s group fanned out and set all sorts of booby traps. They ranged from barbaric ones like pitfalls and swinging logs



to high-tech weapons like magnetic mines and laser beams. Of course, they were also personally armed to the teeth.

As for the other team, they were armed in a slightly different way.

"This is sooooo embarrassing." Teary-eyed, Shinobu whimpered. She was wearing an extremely skimpy swimsuit. Of course, Shinobu wasn't the only one—Motoko, Kitsune, and Mutsumi were also wearing unquestionably sexy swimsuits, flashing almost everything.

"Don't cry, Shinobu," Motoko said.

"This is the only thing we could do, since we cannot join in the fight."

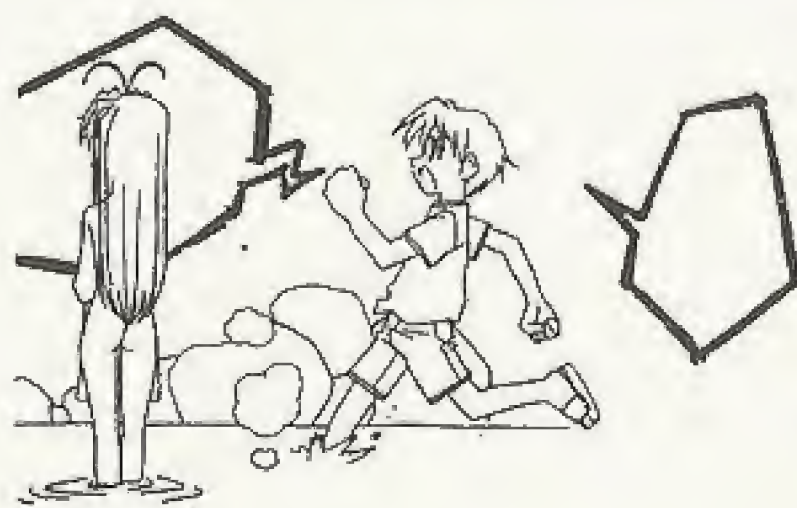
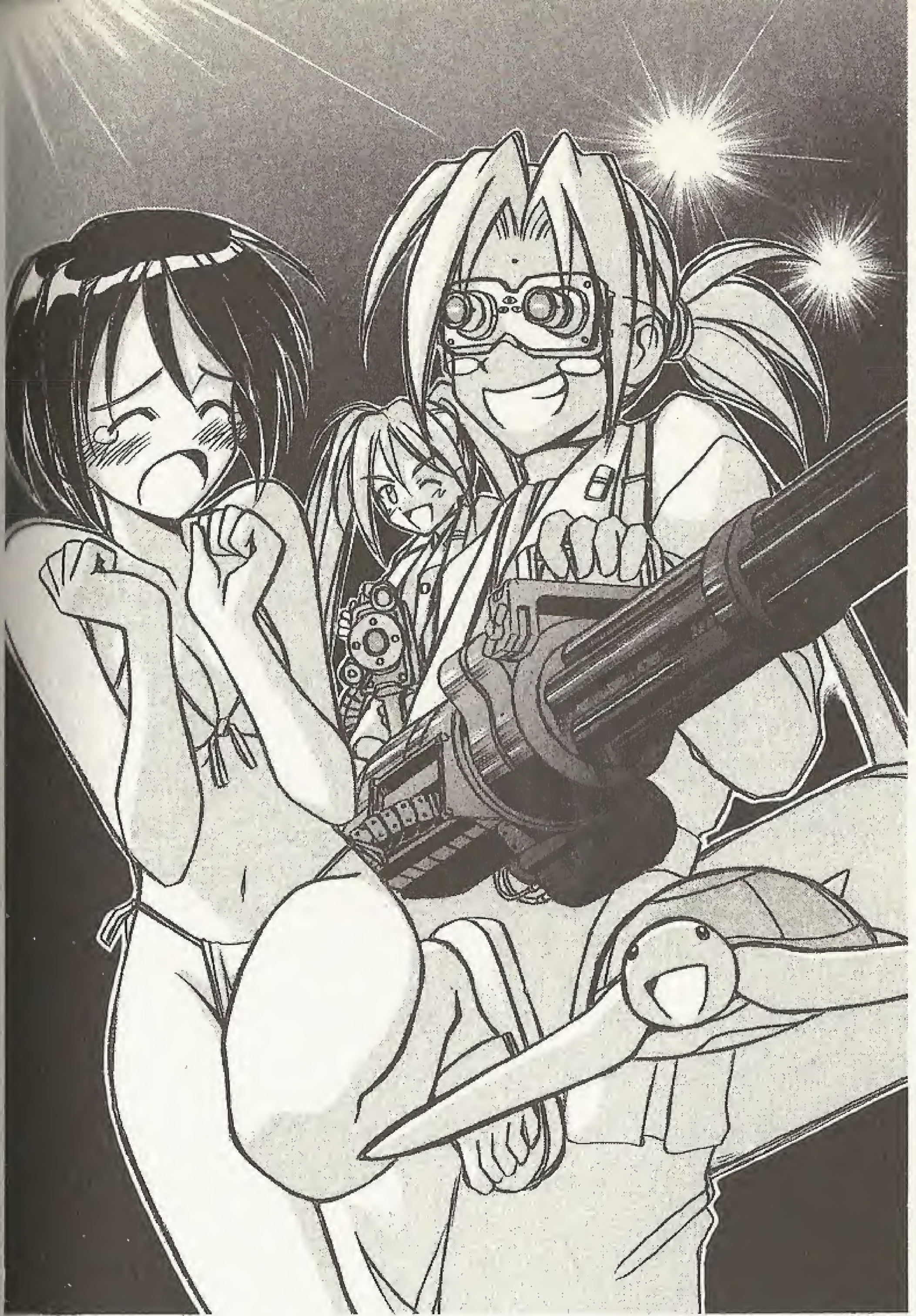
"But . . . I feel stupid!" Shinobu whimpered. "Do I have to do this?"

"We're the bait for Mecha Keitaro," Kitsune said. "If its pattern of behavior imitates the stupidity and pervertedness of the real Keitaro, it can't help but fall for this bait." She wiggled her butt in emphasis.

It was a bold plan, as weird plans go. But it did have a few quirky details.

"Look on the bright side," Mutsumi said. "At least because of Suu's invention, we're not cold."

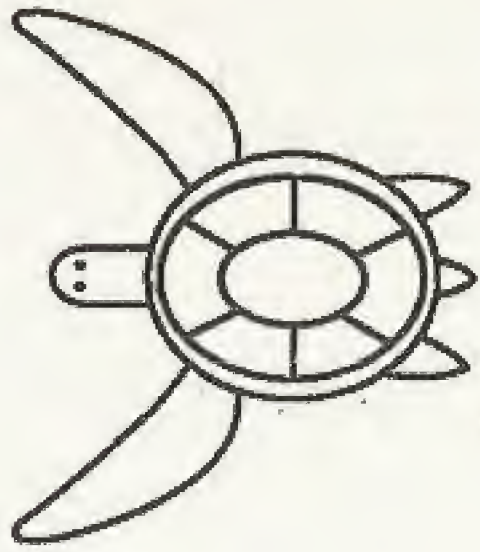
She plucked a thin iridescent material from the shiny surface of her arm—cold weather skin suits, made of nearly



invisible film only a few microns thick, were given to the girls acting as bait. Just because they were exposed to life-threatening danger, Suu reasoned, didn't mean that they should have to suffer the cold. So the plan sounded practical, yet somehow idiotic at the same time.

But strangely, it seemed to be going well. At least at first.

"Look!" Sara squealed. "It's reacting!" She was hiding in the shadows, holding the portable radar unit. She showed the screen to Suu. The blinking red dot was definitely moving from the south section of the main building toward the front entrance.



CHAPTER 4: THE LAST BATTLE AT THAT MEMORABLE PLACE

Naru, hidden safely from sight, checked her watch again.

It was eleven fifty-eight. According to Suu, Mecha Keitaro was going to arrive in one minute. *After it falls into the trap, we have to destroy it pronto*, Naru thought. If Mecha Keitaro uttered even one word of what she had typed in the other day, then that would be the end of it.

And one minute later, as projected, Mecha Keitaro appeared.

Naru peered through her camera's eye, staring at the image of the Hinata House in the background, with the girls in the foreground striking sexy poses to lure the mecha in.

Naru's team held their collective breath as they watched the situation unfold.



"Be a good boy and go to Kitsune," Naru whispered to herself, and Mecha Keitaro lumbered slowly toward the writhing Kitsune.

"Gotcha!" Suu jumped up and said, "It'll fall into the pit soon enough!"

"Get ready, you guys," Naru ordered. Suu and Sara brought their weapons up. Everything was going as planned. But when Naru's watch beeped, indicating midnight, for some reason, Mecha Keitaro suddenly stopped moving.

"Wh-what's going on?" she whispered.

"I don't know," Suu said. Mecha Keitaro stopped just short of the pitfall and slowly twirled its neck around.

"What's wrong?!" Sara growled, frustrated.

Suddenly Mecha Keitaro's voice box croaked, and it said, "IT'S . . . A . . . TRAP . . ."

Everyone was dumbfounded.

"How did it know?" Naru asked, utterly bewildered.

Suu blinked. "I don't know!"

"Oh, it's coming this way!" Sara blurted out.

As they watched, Mecha Keitaro turned away from the pitfall and moved toward Naru's team. It seemed to have responded to Naru and Suu's voices.

The plan, such as it was, had utterly failed. But there was no going back.



Naru's team jumped out of the bushes and fired their weapons. But Mecha Keitaro skillfully evaded the attacks without a scratch. Their faces went white.

Mecha Keitaro spoke again. "I . . . CAN . . . SEE . . . YOUR . . . MOVES . . ."

"It spoke again!"

"What's going on?!" Naru demanded.

"His heart . . ." Suu solemnly said. "Mecha Keitaro has developed emotions. That's gotta be it!"

"No way . . . !" Naru couldn't hide her surprise. But making noise was a fatal mistake. Mecha Keitaro quickly loomed over Naru and grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Eek!"

"Oh no!" Sara cried. "Naru!"

Mecha Keitaro dragged Naru, who was struggling tooth and nail, farther away from the group.

"Let go!" Naru yelled. "Let me go!"

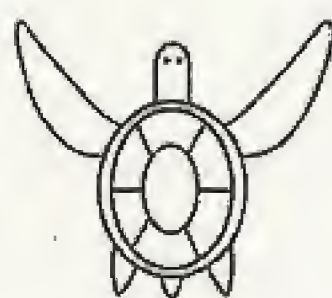
Suddenly Mecha Keitaro stopped moving. After a moment of silence, it released Naru.



“Now!” Motoko prompted, and the girls attacked all at once.

But it was in vain. Mecha Keitaro pulled its four legs into the turtle shell of its lower body and flew away into the skies, thanks to its jet propulsion feature.

The smoke from the jets cleared, and the speechless girls could only stand there.



Later, the girls split up to go find Mecha Keitaro. But by sunrise, they'd had no luck.

“Good morning,” a newscaster on the TV said. “This is the news for today, December tenth.”

Nobody was really watching. Shinobu and Mutsumi were making breakfast in the kitchen. The rest of the girls were in the lobby, discussing options again.

The sleepy-eyed Kitsune croaked, “What can we do, since we don't know where it is and my plan failed? So what happens now?”

“It's not all bad news,” Sara offered, consoling her. On the table before her was a small chunk of curved metal, which she studied intently.

“You got some good news or something?”



“Heck yeah!” Suu leaned forward and held up the metal. “Last night when Mecha Keitaro grabbed Naru, we attacked, right? The back of Mecha Keitaro’s skull plate fell off, and the wires are exposed now.”

“What does that mean?” asked Motoko.

“Just in case, I built a self-destruct button into the back part of Mecha Keitaro’s head. If you push the button, *boom!* Mecha Keitaro will be blown to bits.”

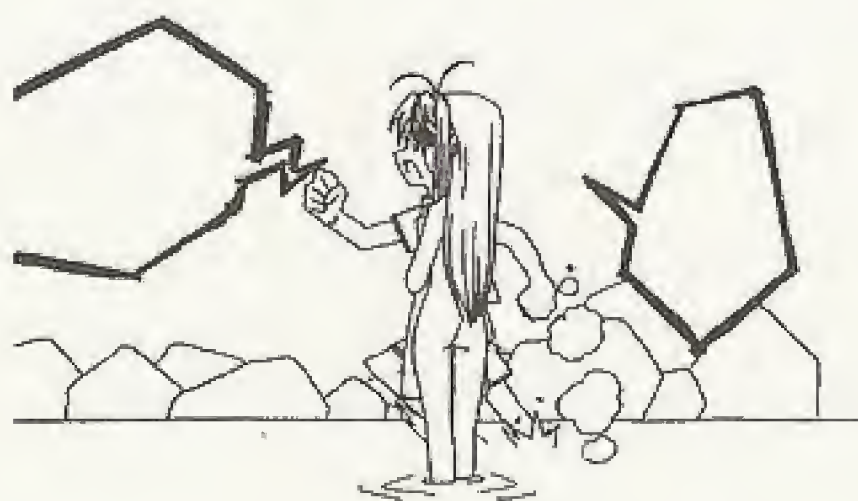
“Okay, but what’ll happen *to you* when you push the button?” Naru asked.

Suu thought hard and answered, “Well, you know.”

Just then, Shinobu interjected. “Everyone, l-look at the television!”

The girls saw Shinobu frozen to the spot, the breakfast tray teetering in her hand, and so they all focused their attention on the TV.

The reporter’s expression had changed to a serious tone. “We repeat, this morning an unidentified robot monster was reported at the Hinata City Public Park in central Hinata



City. The police and fire departments are looking into the matter. We have a confirmed sighting made by a part-time employee of the Second Balloon Café. Here is the interview footage . . .”

The picture switched over to an employee giving a statement to a news reporter. Naru tilted her head when she saw the store in the background.

“That store . . .” she said. Naru wasn’t the only one who seemed troubled.

Suu and Motoko were perplexed.

“It’s like we’ve been there before . . . I think . . .” Suu said slowly.

“Yeah . . .” Sara agreed, but they couldn’t pinpoint where or when it was.

Suddenly Naru brightened. “The movie theater!” she exclaimed.

“Huh?” Kitsune and others were lost.

The reporter came back with new information. “We have just received this information—the monster robot is now in front of the Hinata Cineplex . . . I repeat, the monster robot has appeared!”

Everyone was dumbstruck. They all looked at Naru.

“You were so totally right!” they said.

“But how did you know?” Shinobu asked.



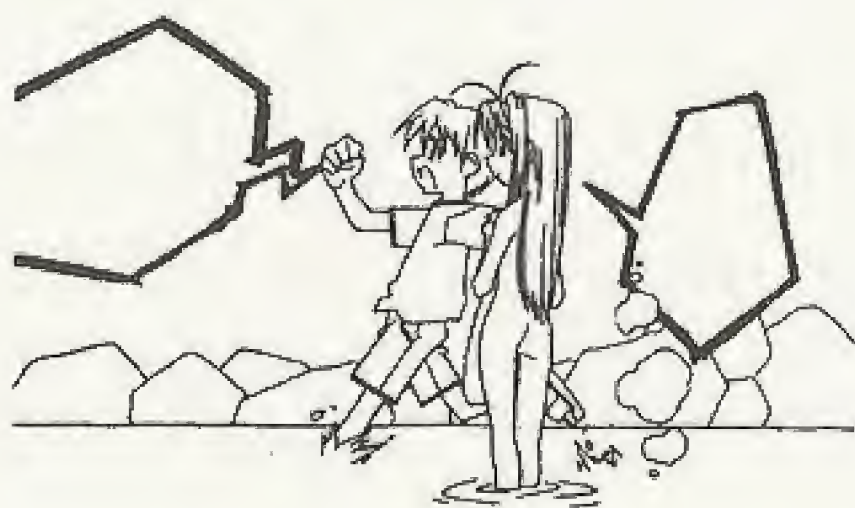
Naru fidgeted and said, “Well—”

But the reporter interrupted. “Now the monster robot is engaged in a firefight with the police. Can we see what is happening over there? We have images of the scene. Hazuki, can you hear us?”

The TV screen switched to the scene in front of the Hinata Cineplex. The images were coming from a shaky video camera, but it was definitely Mecha Keitaro running around in the background.

Hazuki, the on-site reporter, struggled to remain professional. “Right now, well actually about a minute ago, the city and raid police were given authorization to fire, and they have started to engage in combat with the monster robot!”

But it was obvious that the weapons the police force was using weren’t as powerful as the ones Suu and Sara had installed on Mecha Keitaro. The police’s marksmanship skills were top-notch—but they were hitting Mecha Keitaro, round after round, to no effect.



Mecha Keitaro lurched forward. It raised both of its arms, let out a strange growl, and spit a stream of sparks.

Everyone assumed that it was a new type of weapon and tensed, but Suu's shoulders slumped. "Drat!" she muttered.

The other girls got the feeling that something very bad was about to happen.

"The central core is going berserk!" Suu exclaimed.

"Um, isn't that dangerous?" Sara asked, her face blanching.

"What the heck is going on?!" Kitsune demanded.

Motoko folded her arms. "Please explain it so we can understand."

"Well," Suu began, "it's like this—Mecha Keitaro moved around so much that the central core has gone berserk, and if left alone, it will cause a big explosion."

The girls gaped at her; Naru pressed for more information. "How big?" she asked. "Like, exactly?"

Suu thought about it. "Well, the explosion isn't the normal kind," she murmured, "so not only will it completely obliterate Hinata City, it could burn down the surrounding forests, too."

She said this as if it were not only obvious, but perfectly normal. But there was more. "The self-destruct button isn't powerful enough to reach the core," she added. "All it will do



is break it into pieces. But if the core has a meltdown . . . in one hour, we're goners."

Naru and the girls imagined the same thing—a pillar of fire shooting up in the sky, and the following explosion wiping the whole city out . . . the end of Hinata.

"No . . . Oh dear . . . !" Shinobu's eyes rolled to the back of her head and she promptly passed out.

"There's no use freaking out over it!" Kitsune roared. "Bring on the booze! Booze!"

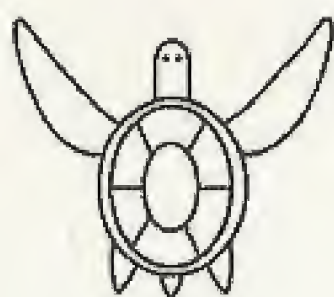
Motoko held a writing tablet and wrote, "The *bushido* code of honor demands my death. I must now write my last poem . . ."

Mutsumi didn't quite grasp the situation. "Oh my." She squeaked. She seemed only slightly surprised, like she'd just missed a bus or something.

Everyone was panicking except Naru.

"We can't give up just yet," she said calmly. The girls looked at her. "We'll use the last resort." She looked utterly serious, determined.





Mecha Keitaro broke through the police barricades and headed inexorably toward the Hinata Aquarium. The police fired again when they reached the site, but received counter-fire from Mecha Keitaro and were forced to retreat.

No one could stop Mecha Keitaro now. The prefectural government had set up an emergency meeting to deal with the grave situation. The Self Defense Forces were preparing to deploy in case there was a request for their assistance, but the bureaucratic meeting just dragged on without any clear resolution.

With no one stopping Mecha Keitaro, it left the aquarium and then suddenly disappeared. As if it had a specific objective . . .

"Is it really going to come here?" Shinobu asked with a worried look, but Naru shook her head and gazed far away. The others just stood there, puzzled.

Naru told them that a certain walkway, located on the outskirts of city, was the place Mecha Keitaro would finally appear. The girls ran there as fast as they could.

The walkway was located at a high point overlooking the city, but there were many similar such places, so it was hard to



imagine Mecha Keitaro specifically coming to that very one.

Sara looked at her watch and exclaimed, “We only have five minutes left!”

“Hey, Naru, he’s gonna come here, right?!” Kitsune asked, her face draining of all color.

Suddenly, a mechanical clang rang out. It was the distinct noise of a broken machine.

“Look! Over there!” Motoko pointed ahead.

On the land bridge connecting the observation tower and the walkway, Mecha Keitaro crawled toward them. It was in horrible shape. The girls gasped at its disfigurement.

The police rounds had mostly destroyed its outer armor, and the frayed internal wiring stuck out. Some parts were burned from the partial fires that still broke out on its body. The face, now a burnt, blackened, skeleton-like structure, was mostly gone. It didn’t look like Keitaro anymore. It looked ghastly.

“I feel sorry for it . . .” Shinobu lamented. “I mean really, really sorry.”



Mutsumi had tears in her eyes. "Urashima," she murmured, still unable to differentiate between the real Keitaro and the mecha.

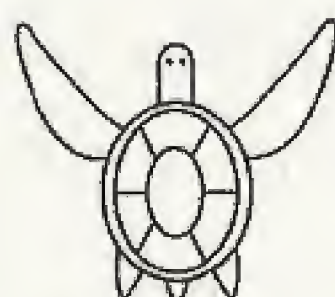
Sara yelled, "Three more minutes!"

When Naru heard that, she suddenly straightened her shoulders. "Everyone, wait here!" she ordered, then ran to Mecha Keitaro.

"Stupid girl!" Kitsune called out. "Don't go by yourself! At least not unarmed!"

Kitsune tried to follow her, but Motoko stubbornly blocked the path. "She must have a plan. Let's trust Naru."

So the girls stood there and waited as the minutes slowly ticked down.



On the other side of the bridge, Naru stood in front of Mecha Keitaro. The horrible machine tried to raise both arms to embrace her and made hurt, animal-like noises. Naru, hesitant at first, finally gathered her courage and spoke.

"You don't have to be angry," she said. "You know me, right? It's Naru."

Mecha Keitaro stopped moving. The exposed camera eye focused on Naru, and its tattered voice box squawked.



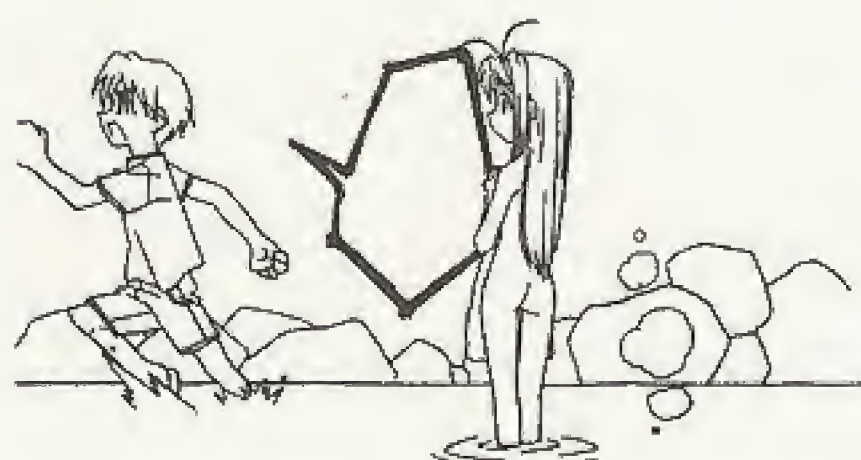
“NA . . . RU . . .”

“Yes,” she said, trying to play it cool. “I knew you were going to come here. You were trying to go back there, right?” Naru pointed at the old photo print machine behind her. It was a memorable place for Naru and the real-life Keitaro.

One year before, on the twenty-first of October, Naru and Keitaro took a picture of themselves on their first date. Naru had realized something during the morning news—Mecha Keitaro kept appearing in spots in the order that they visited them on their date.

Naru didn’t really know why Mecha Keitaro was revisiting their date course, though.

It turned out that the calendar mechanism in Mecha Keitaro’s brain had malfunctioned, and instead of it being December tenth (12/10), it was erroneously set to October twenty-first (10/21). Mecha Keitaro’s behavior pattern reflected that of the real Keitaro, thinking that today was the big date.



"Hurry, Naru! Only one minute left!" Suu urged from far away.

"I'm sorry," Naru softly said to the damaged creature. "Let's end this." She reached to the back of Keitaro's head.

Then it spoke again, struggling to get out the words, "I . . . LO . . . VE . . . YOU . . ."

Naru was surprised. For a split second, her mind overlapped Keitaro's image on the burnt, black, skeletal visage. No matter how much his feelings were hurt, or his body was battered, Keitaro was always by her side. Looking at the disfigured Mecha Keitaro, she remembered all the memories she'd had with Keitaro thus far.

"I . . . I . . . LOVE . . . YOU . . . NARUSE . . . GAWA . . ."

Naru hugged Mecha Keitaro as best she could and said, "Thank you for letting me remember."

As she embraced the tortured mecha, her fingers found the button on the back of its head.

Sara yelled, "Thirty seconds!"

Naru closed her eyes—and pushed the button.

Mecha Keitaro's eyes flashed for a second. Then tiny particles radiated around its body, first collapsing toward the center, then bursting out, pushing Naru away.

Naru landed far away from the mecha.



The energy grew and intensified. The last thing she saw was its face as it turned toward her. It seemed like it was smiling.

Then, *WHOOOSH!*

Mecha Keitaro became a giant ball of fire and broke into a million sparkling pieces.

Motoko rushed forward and helped Naru up. Together they joined the other girls, and they all gazed sadly upon the flames.

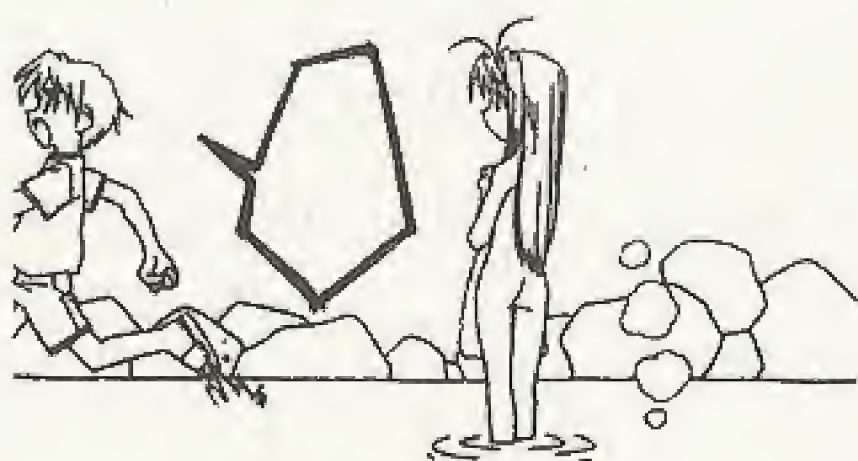
"It's over," Mutsumi quietly said.

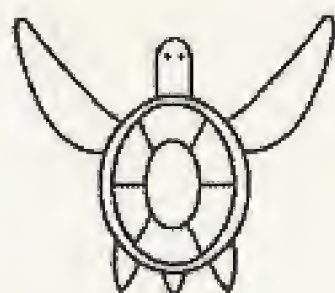
"But why didn't it attack Naru?" Shinobu pondered, tilting her head. None of the girls had been able to hear Naru and Mecha Keitaro's last conversation.

"Did it really have emotions?" Motoko wondered.

Kitsune replied, "Well, we'll never know, will we?"

Naru heard them, but she remained silent. She could never explain that this was their first date. She didn't want to be teased, and more importantly, she wished to keep the precious memory all to herself.





And so Hinata City was saved. Even Hinata House returned to its normal, peaceful state. The sun shone brightly. The birds sang. Life continued on much as it always had.

Naru sighed, smiling slightly, as she raked leaves into neat little piles in the center courtyard of the girls' dorm.

"I got it!" Suu called out to her suddenly.

"What did you get, Suu?"

"I finally figured out why Mecha Keitaro spoke," she explained. "According to my reports, someone turned off the laptop while the voice commands were still being uploaded, and the word fragments were randomly chosen."

Naru looked perplexed. "So those words were . . ."

"Just a coincidence," Suu concluded.

How could such a thing possibly be a coincidence? Naru thought. She wondered if Mecha Keitaro really did have some of Keitaro's emotions.

Sara ran up to Suu and said, "Kaolla, let's go play!"

"You're on!"

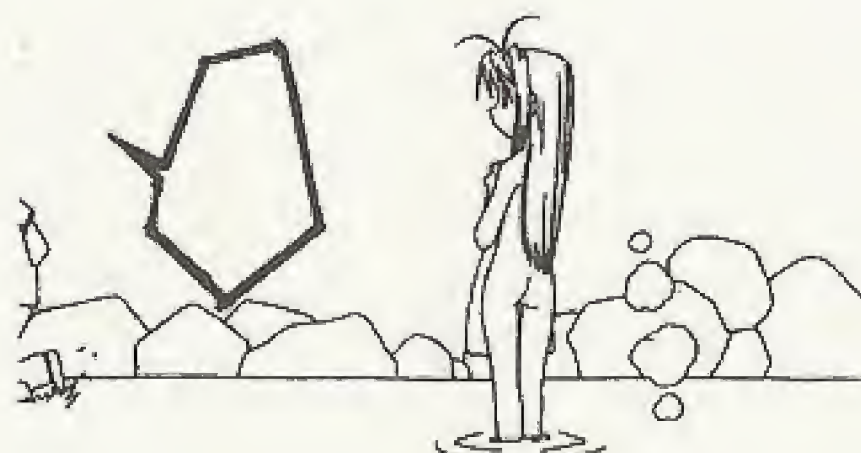
"Both of you, don't bother Shinobu or Motoko while they're studying," Naru warned, but she tempered her words with a cheerful smile.

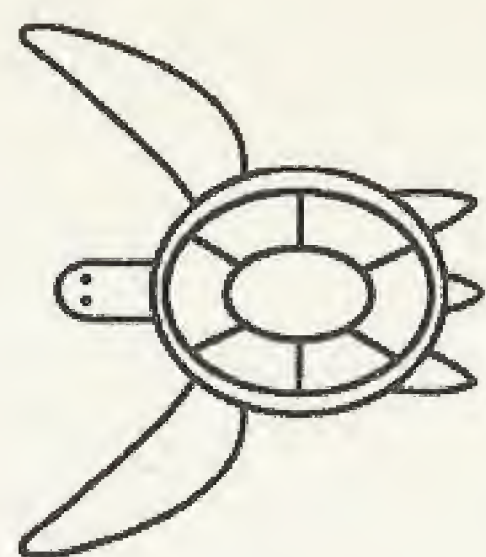


Suu and Sara ran off, giggling.

Naru sighed and pulled out her address book. On the back side of the leather cover was a photo sticker. It was a picture she had taken of herself, after she had bidden farewell to Mecha Keitaro.

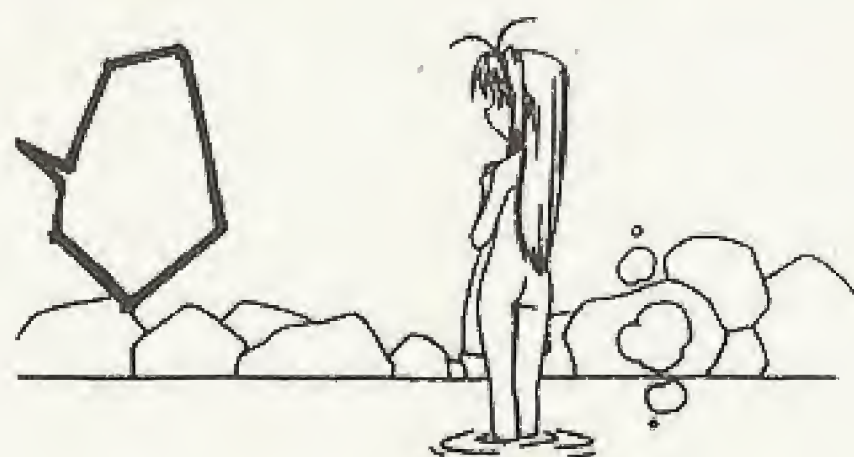
"I look a little lost . . . Like Keitaro before he met me," Naru murmured, then looked up to the blue skies and smiled.



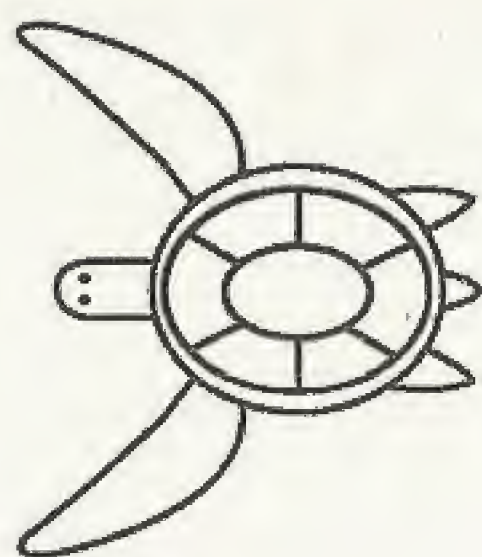


PART II:

HOLIDAY NIGHT FOR THE STUDYING KNIGHT







CHAPTER 1: MOTOKO'S SECRET AND KITSUNE'S LIE

It was the middle of December and winter was in full force. Snow blanketed the ground.

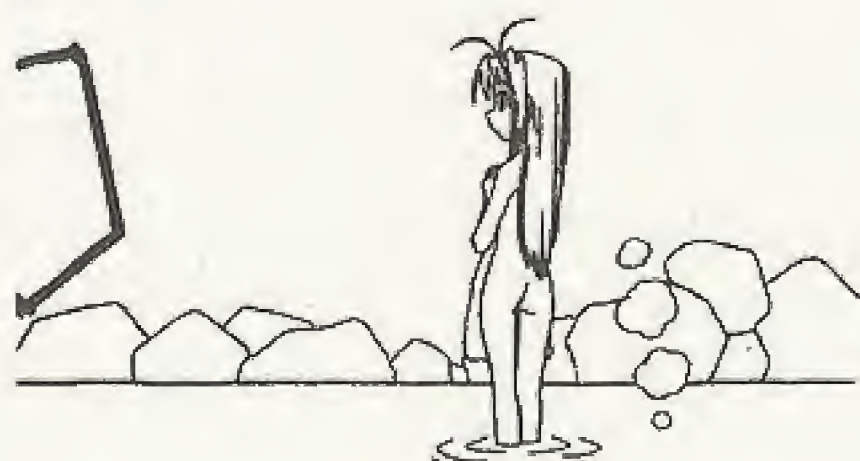
Because of crazy year-end schedules, the townspeople walked briskly, as if in a hurry to get to somewhere. Though busy, the people seemed cheery, probably because Christmas and New Year's parties were getting closer.

But there were some people who could not enjoy the festivities no matter what. Take, for example, students studying to get into the next level of education.

"Okay, are you ready?" Mutsumi asked Shinobu, who sat in front of her.

Shinobu was a little nervous but quickly replied, "Yes!"

Naru started the stopwatch. "Begin!" she said.



It was Saturday. Naru and Mutsumi were conducting a practice test to see how well Shinobu had done with her studies. She finished in record time.

Her progress was good—though there were several mistakes from hasty or inflexible responses. Still, she had the basics down, so if she worked on her weak areas, she would probably pass the entrance exam to M High.

Tears welled up in Shinobu eyes and she said, “Thank you very much. If it wasn’t the help I received from the two of you . . .” A tear rolled down her cheek.

“Oh my, don’t cry,” Mutsumi said comfortingly.

“That’s right,” Naru said. “You still have a few more months before the big test.”

Shinobu hugged Mutsumi and Naru, then wiped her tears away and said, “Yes, I will do my best.” She was crying out of happiness.

Right then, Motoko entered the room with a textbook in her hand. “Naru, may I borrow you for a minute?”

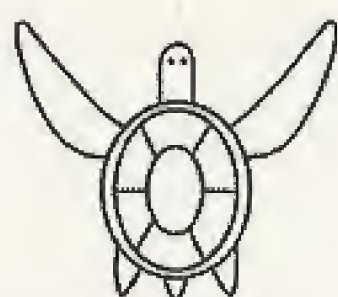
“What’s wrong, Motoko?”

“I’m not sure how to solve this problem . . .”

Motoko was also studying, but she didn’t usually get much tutoring. She came every once in a while to ask a question. This time, Naru sensed, the answer would be a good bit trickier.



Let's go back to the beginning of December . . .

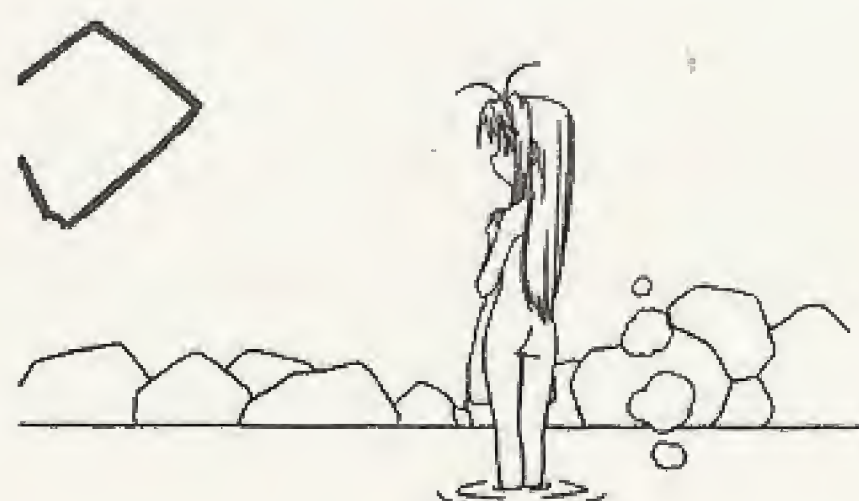


Naru began tutoring Shinobu, and offered to help Motoko also. But Motoko said, "Naru, you're already filling in for Urashima's absence by being the substitute manager. On top of that, you teach at a local cram school and have your own college studies. I don't want to burden you by asking for help."

Motoko had politely declined Naru's offer, but in truth that was just a cover. She didn't want Naru to find out what college she was aiming for—she was secretly applying for Todai.

Back during the cherry blossom season, when Keitaro finally made it into Todai, Motoko remembered saying, "I'm studying to get into college, too. Since you studied for four years to get in, I'd like to get some of your advice . . ."

She wasn't thinking about Todai then. Motoko decided to aim for Tokyo University after the incident with her older sister, Tsuruko. (Tsuruko came to have Motoko take over the shin mei ryu



dojo, and caused a large commotion involving Naru and Keitaro, but ended up agreeing to let Motoko study for college.) After all the struggles and suffering, she had obtained her ticket to freedom. And the liberated Motoko thought if she was going to study, why not aim for the best?

But she never revealed her plans to Naru and Keitaro, who were both currently students at Todai.

If she had, Keitaro would probably have cheered her on. He'd probably have said, "You can do it, Motoko," or something similarly upbeat and hopeful. But Motoko knew that if Keitaro said something so gentle and sweet, her strong façade would have surely crumbled.

Motoko didn't want to hurt Naru, because Naru would probably shout the good news to the whole world. If people found out that she was aiming for Todai, Kitsune would probably tease her and say, "You're going after Keitaro." She didn't want that to happen, since Naru was someone she looked up to and admired, and Motoko didn't want to cause a fight between Naru and Keitaro.

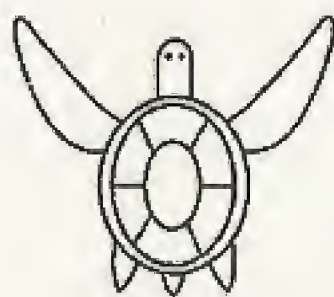
Which, just before sundown, is exactly what happened.

To make matters even more tense, Shinobu was hanging "I want to go to Todai!" wish tags on bamboo sticks and got horribly teased by Kitsune and the other girls.

Motoko said, "It's good to have high goals!" She was ostensibly defending Shinobu, but she was defending herself, too.



If Shinobu was merely laughed at, that wouldn't have been too bad, but Suu had actually tried to reconfigure the poor girl's brain! After seeing Shinobu treated with so little respect, and how easily Naru and Keitaro could quarrel, Motoko vowed not to tell anyone which college she wanted to attend.



And up until now, Motoko's secret had remained—well, a secret. But that was all about to change.

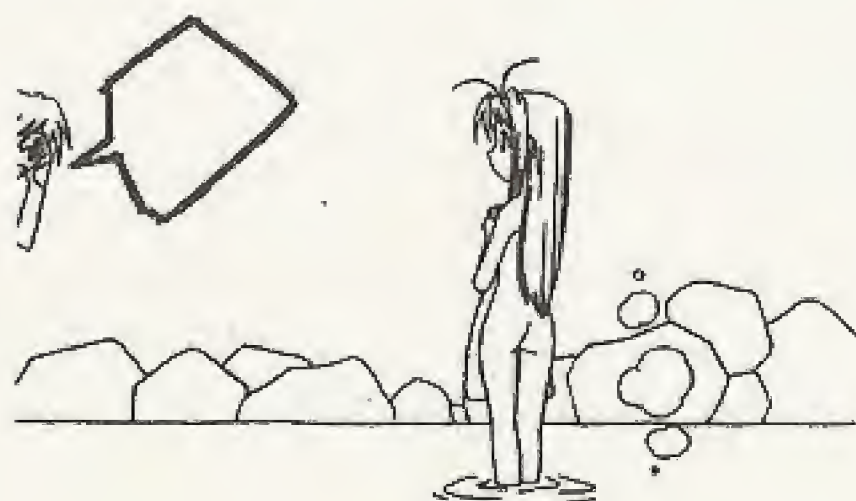
“ . . . Motoko, are you listening?”

“Eh?” Motoko stared blankly up from her textbook. “I-I'm sorry . . . I was trying to listen to your explanation, but I lost my concentration and my mind went elsewhere.”

In other words, she had no idea what Naru had said. Motoko slumped her shoulders.

Naru tried to comfort her. “It's okay; this problem is a little difficult.”

“Please let me see it.” Mutsumi stared at the question.



"Oh my, it *is* hard. But there's no need to solve this difficult a problem. Something probably this advanced won't be on the test, so . . ."

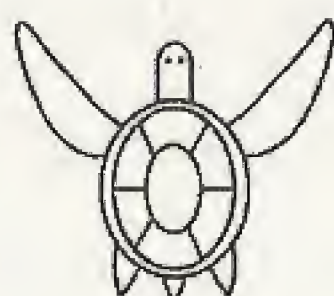
"Unless you're trying to get into Todai, of course," Mutsumi added.

An invisible sword pierced Motoko's heart.

"O-o-of course, right," Motoko said. "Ha ha ha." She forced a smile and laughed, but Naru was suddenly curious.

"Oh yeah, what college are you studying for, anyway?" she asked.

Motoko gulped and said, "Thank you." Then she shuffled away.



Motoko entered the courtyard and stared into space. It was impossible for her to aim for Todai. She felt so embarrassed.

Motoko knelt down and pulled open her shirt. "I will just cause embarrassment by continuing fruitlessly! So I will end my life here!" She pulled out a dagger—bent on committing ritual suicide. Again.

"Well then, farewell!"

Right when she was about to stab her stomach, the dagger she was holding slipped away.



“What?!”

Motoko’s freed dagger floated in the air.

“Wh-what is going on . . . ? Don’t tell me that I studied so hard that I’m hallucinating!” Amid Motoko’s confusion, she felt something dull hitting her on the back of the head.

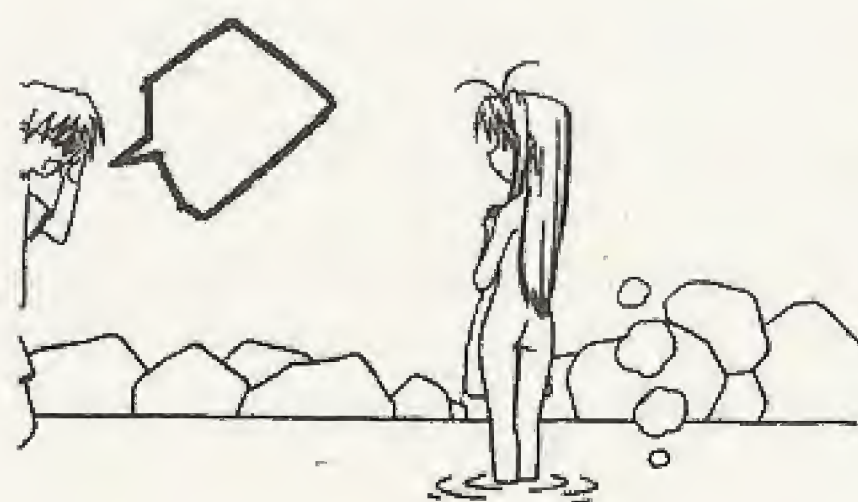
“Who’s that?” She turned, but no one was there. Although she couldn’t see anything, her specially trained senses told her there was something there. Well, her senses and a mysteriously floating dagger.

A voice came from the void. “Oh no! I guess you found me.”

“Th-that voice—!” Motoko gasped. The air slightly altered before her, and suddenly Kitsune appeared.

It seemed a superfluous item, but on Kitsune’s chest was a tiny, peculiar test unit called Stealth Mini, which was a simple optical camouflage mecha.

Stealth Mini was the improved version of the Stealth Suit 2000 and one of the more practical things that Suu had made.



The improvement was that instead of wearing a suit, the little mecha altered the area *around* the person to camouflage them.

Suu and Sara also wore the same device on their chests and appeared moments later. The three of them were testing the new mecha.

"Motoko, here's your knife." Suu grinned and returned the dagger to Motoko. "You were trying to commit suicide again, weren't you?"

"None of your business!" Motoko snapped back.

Kitsune teased her. "Oh come on," she said. "No thanks for the people who just saved your life?"

"I didn't ask for your help!" Motoko said, mortally embarrassed. Bad enough she was still disturbed by what happened in Naru's room, but now this?

But Kitsune kept up the torturous conversation. "I don't know which college you're aiming for, but I can't drink if you keep causing trouble like this," she chided. "That idiot Keitaro took three years to get in, but he didn't cause as much trouble as you!"

Motoko winced, but Kitsune's next words wounded her deeper still. "That idiot got into Todai!"

The invisible sword stabbed Motoko in the heart again. She bit her lips in shame and ran away.



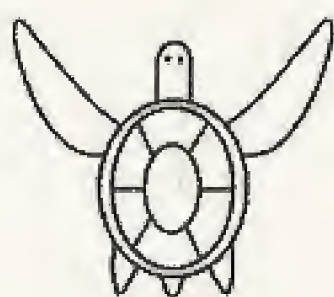
“Hey, Motoko!” Kitsune called after her.

“Let’s chase her!” Suu said, fiddling with her chest mecha.

“Hold up, you two.” Kitsune stopped the two girls.

“Why’d you stop us?” Sara asked. “Are you sure we should leave Motoko alone?”

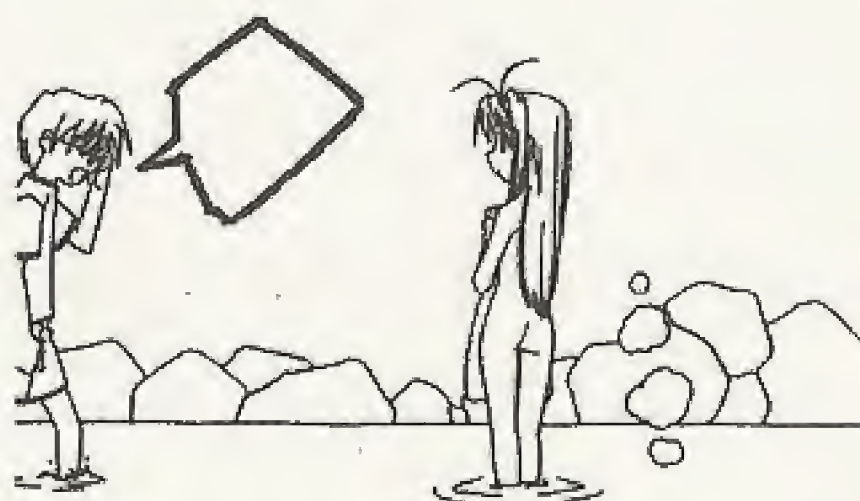
Kitsune smiled back and said, “Leave her be.” Her facial expression was unusually gentle.



Motoko was by herself in a park. The sun was about to set, fading gold beams shooting into the purple twilight.

In her mind, the sunset was overlapped by . . . Keitaro’s smile. “Cripes!” she grumbled. “If only I hadn’t met you in the first place!”

Motoko kept her sword in its sheath and swung it around. She looked more like a child throwing a tantrum than a skilled swordswoman. Eventually, the sword smacked



the frame of a swing set and the vibration rippled through her whole body.

How could I be so pathetic? she thought, and became even more depressed. *Do I have any right to get so pissed at Kitsune?*

The answer, of course, was no. Getting teased about Keitaro wasn't a good feeling, but she had no right to hate Kitsune. Actually, the person she should hate was . . . herself. Or at least the special feelings she had locked away inside her own heart.

Inside Motoko, it seemed, was *another* Motoko.

She grew up as the successor of the shin mei ryu sword style, and she chose strength over beauty, and power over grace. She trained daily, but there was another Motoko inside that didn't agree with those militaristic ways. It was Keitaro who sparked the fire of this other, softer, hidden Motoko.

She could see it all now . . .

"Motoko, you're ever so beautiful today."

"Urashima . . ."

Motoko couldn't help her throbbing heart when Keitaro looked into her eyes. Like a flower thirsting for water, she sought Keitaro. But no matter how many times she told her heart to be still, it was impossible to hold back the overflowing feelings.

"Urashima, I . . ." Motoko's cheeks blushed as her lips pursed shut. She was too embarrassed to even finish the sentence.



Keitaro gently embraced Motoko and said, "You don't need to say it. I know what you want." And he looked deeply into her eyes.

He had beautiful eyes. They were clear like the sky. She felt that he could look all the way into her very core. She knew that she couldn't lie to his face. She was tied by chains of passion, and sought the pleasures of love. A weak, helpless love slave.

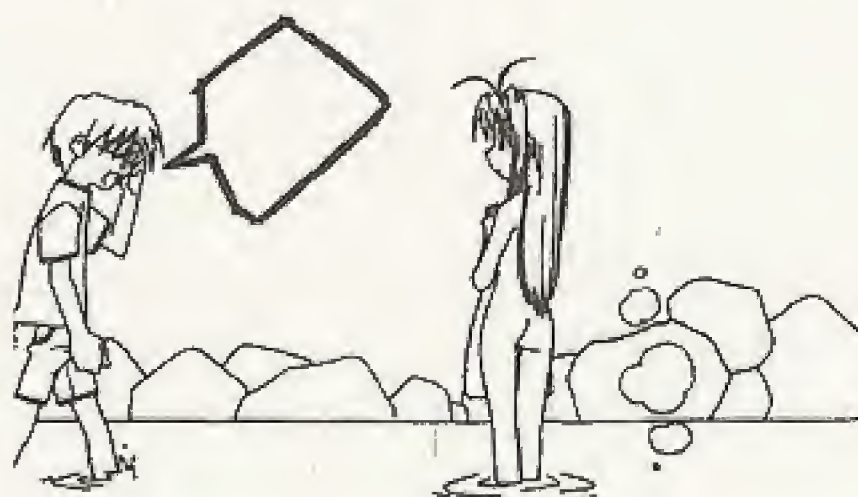
"Please . . . take me . . ."

Her voice trailed off and she trembled. Keitaro's muscular arms wrapped around her thin, delicate body. Her soft breasts were pressed against his chest. She was embarrassed, but the sensation ignited another fire within her.

"You're so beautiful, Motoko."

Keitaro stroked Motoko's cheek. The firm yet comforting touch made her all the more excited. Keitaro's finger trailed down Motoko's neck and went lower.

Motoko could only imagine where all this would lead. It was immoral. But in front of this man, she could be shameless and have no regrets.



"Motoko."

Surprised, she looked at Keitaro. He smiled at her. Her heart raced. This was all so sudden, but she trusted him. So she smiled back and then closed her eyes. She could feel his warmth. Keitaro was closing in on her.

She wanted this. She always had.

Their lips touched—

"What the heck am I doing?!" Motoko shouted, coming to her senses.

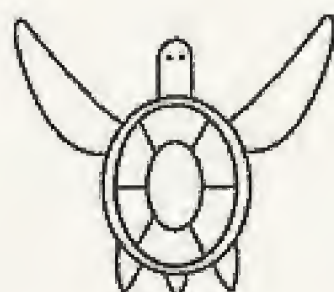
It was dark. The sun had already set. She had been daydreaming for quite some time. She was so shocked that she grabbed her sword, goose bumps rising up along her pale skin.

"Argh!" she yelled, swinging her sword up and down frantically, as if to banish the evil thoughts.

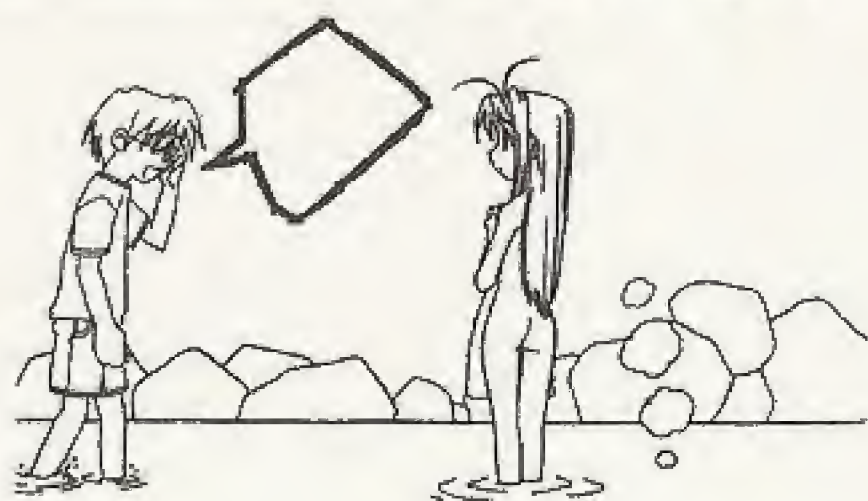
Then she heard an all-too-familiar voice.

"Well, well, it is very reassuring to see that you still practice your sword skills in between your studies."

Motoko froze.



"Motoko tried to commit ritual suicide again?" Naru asked Kitsune.



Kitsune sounded oddly remorseful. "Yeah," she said. "And when I wanted her to fight back and let out some of her tension, I think I might have ended up hurting her feelings instead."

Kitsune had become worried because Motoko still hadn't returned, so she sought advice. "Tell me something," she asked Naru. "Do you think Motoko will make it into college?"

"Well, I don't know where she's aiming to get into, but maybe . . ."

"You mean it doesn't matter what she chooses, since her hopes of getting into any college are thin?" Kitsune became more worried.

Naru fretted for a moment, but she remembered that Motoko was a strong swordswoman and said, "Motoko should be just fine. Other than turtles, she's pretty invincible."

"I thought so, too, but you know," Kitsune said, "life has three slopes."

"Three slopes?"

"The slope that goes uphill, the slope that goes downhill, and the slope that doesn't go anywhere."

"What?"

"Nothing. Never mind."

"It's bugging me now," Naru said. "Tell me."

Kitsune looked around. "Don't tell the others."



Naru watched as Kitsune made a zipping motion across her lips. Confused, Naru just nodded.

Kitsune paused for a bit and slowly opened her mouth. "I tried to egg her on, but I might have added some of my true feelings in it," she confessed. "Everyone was talking about college—like you, Keitaro, and that turtle-girl Mutsumi are in Todai—and now Shinobu and Motoko are studying for entrance exams. I kind of felt left behind, that's all."

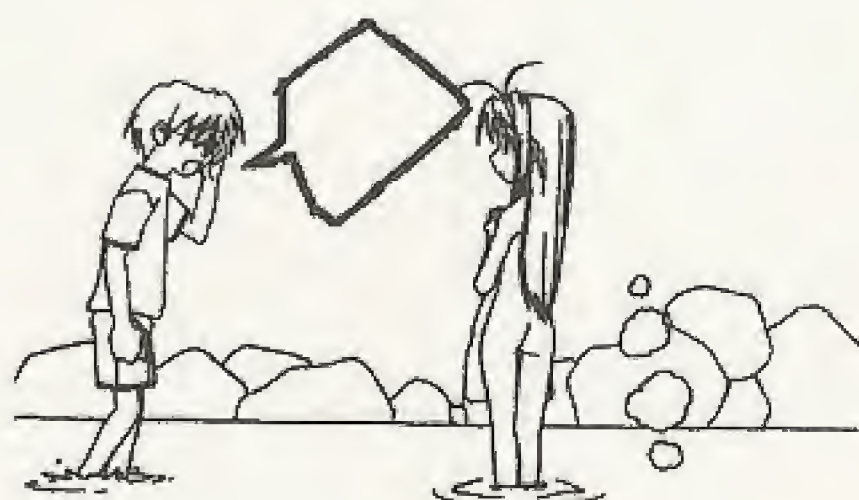
"Oh . . ." Naru was surprised at Kitsune's candor.

"I know, you guys don't mean to be exclusionary," Kitsune said. "But with all of you talking about practice exam results, national rankings and stuff . . . I'm not a part of that world, you know?"

"Kitsune . . ."

"So, maybe without even realizing it, I was getting disgusted about it, and maybe I took it out on Motoko . . ." Kitsune smirked sadly.

Naru placed her hand on Kitsune's shoulder and said, "Shall we go find Motoko?"



"What?"

"I think we should look—for Motoko's and your sake."

Kitsune looked down. Her shoulder shook a bit—she seemed like she was crying. But when Kitsune raised her face, she was grinning madly, like she had pulled a fantastic prank.

"All righty then!"

"Eh?" Naru blinked.

"We've got the manager's approval! Let's hurry then. Let's wake up everyone and go find Motoko!"

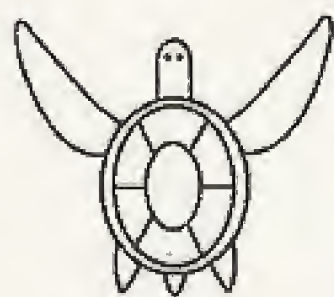
"W-wait . . . What?" Naru was baffled, taken aback by Kitsune's quick recovery.

The sly fox spoke over her shoulder. "It would have been dangerous to confront Motoko by myself. I didn't want to go alone."

"So your story . . ."

"I'd make a great actress, don't you think?" Kitsune said and winked. "Okay, let's meet downstairs in ten minutes. Don't be late now."

Naru just stood there, stunned. But what Kitsune had said didn't seem like a lie . . . Naru shook her head and followed.





Ten minutes later, the residents of the Hinata House had gathered downstairs. Even though it was late at night, Kitsune was brimming with energy.

"All righty, everyone," she said. "Let's go find Motoko!"

"Yaaawn . . . 'kay." Shinobu was still half-asleep.

"I'm gonna eat my bananas." Suu was still dreaming.

Sara was leaning against Naru, snoring.

"Hey, Kitsune," Naru said. "You and I should just go by ourselves."

"Well, I guess."

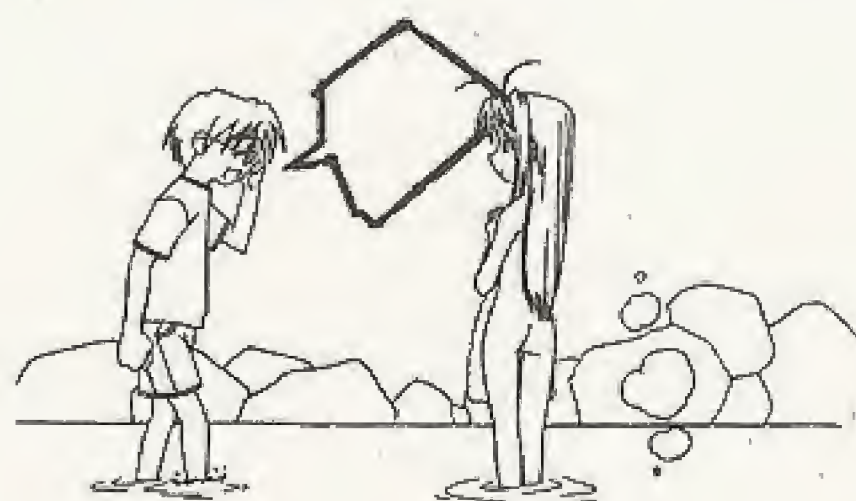
But they didn't have to go far to find the missing resident. The door opened, and Motoko came back, just like that.

"Motoko! Where have you been all this time?"

"Well . . ." she began.

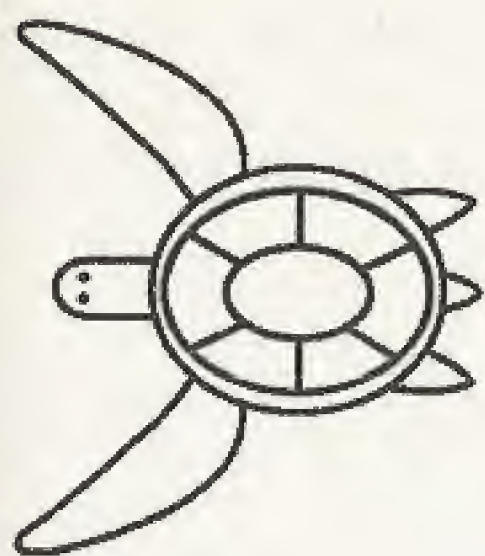
But right when she started to talk, another voice came from behind her.

"We apologize. I haven't seen my Motoko for such a long time, so I wanted to have dinner with her, but we ended up talking for quite a while."



Motoko's older sister, Tsuruko, walked up the stairs. "So nice to see everyone again," she said pleasantly.

Naru and Kitsune could only blink at Tsuruko's graceful accent.



CHAPTER 2: THE LIVING SOULS EXCHANGE

This was the second time that the residents of the Hinata House had seen Motoko's older sister, Tsuruko. Last time she came to take Motoko home, but why she had come this second time was a mystery.

"I had some work to do in Tokyo, so I just dropped by on the way back," Tsuruko offered by way of explanation, as she sipped on some tea that Naru served in the Hinata House lobby.

As Naru listened, she couldn't help but gaze at Tsuruko's beauty. Her soft accent and snow-white skin. Her lush, jet-black hair. She didn't have any makeup on, but she didn't need any. Intermixed with her poise was her maturity. This was the alluring quality of a married woman.



Motoko, who sat next to her sister, was nervous as a cat. Actually, she looked more like a trembling mouse caught by a cat.

Motoko looked up to Tsuruko with awe. If her sister felt the slightest bit angry, her eyes would blaze like a demon's. Motoko couldn't dare go against her. In fact, Tsuruko had been certifiably vicious for most of her life—it was only after she married that she finally showed the softer side of her personality.

Naru remembered how scary Tsuruko had been during their encounter in Kyoto.

"I tucked Shinobu and the other girls into bed," Kitsune said as she returned to the lobby.

Naru whispered to Kitsune, "Motoko's sister might look like an angel, but she can be a devil."

"I heard the rumors," Kitsune whispered back. "She's some kind of evil monster, right?"

"I am not an evil monster."

Naru and Kitsune gulped. Their voices hadn't been loud at all.

Tsuruko had trained her ears to be able to hear a pin drop a hundred yards away. But she wasn't angry about it. "We are monster *hunters*," she said. "Please don't put us in the same category."



Indeed, Motoko's ancestors were an invincible warrior-class family that hunted monsters and evil spirits in Kyoto, and used a sword style called shin mei ryu, or "Sound of the Gods" technique. These traditions had been passed down through the generations.

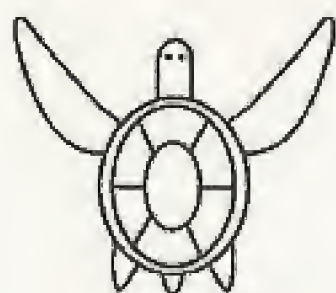
"It is way past midnight," Tsuruko said. She asked politely, "May I be allowed to stay overnight?"

"Of course," Naru said. "She'll stay in your room, right, Motoko?"

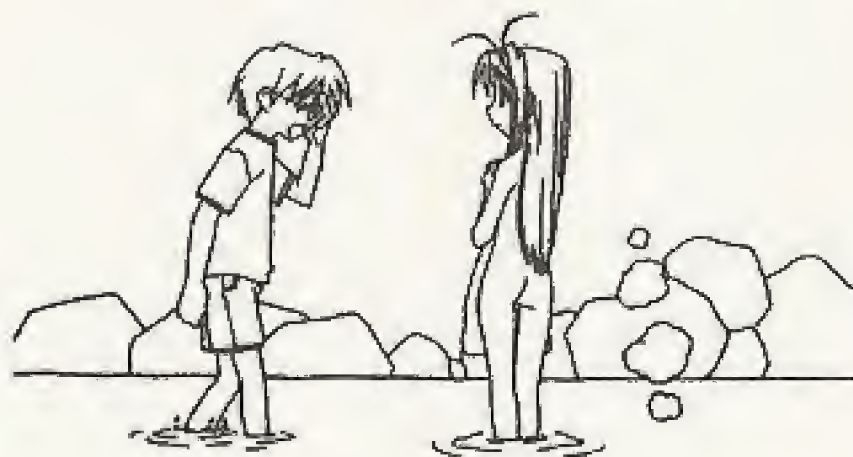
Motoko choked, then stammered nervously, "Y-yes."

"Motoko, I envy you," Kitsune said. "Enjoy the rest of the night relaxing with your sister."

Motoko nodded, but there was no way she would relax.

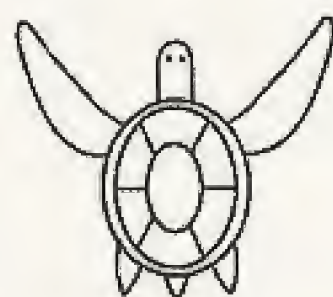


Next to her sister, who was sleeping soundly, Motoko was so nervous that she couldn't even blink. She was frozen stiff by fear.



Sometimes her sister grumbled, "Take this, Motoko!" in her sleep. It caused Motoko to jump out of the futon in a panic. She knew she was dead meat—it was only a matter of time.

The sun finally broke through the darkness and Motoko stared at it blearily. She had not been able to get a wink of sleep that night.



Sunday morning came. Other than Motoko, who was dragging her butt from lack of sleep, the others were wound up. After eating breakfast, everyone crowded around Tsuruko and made small talk.

Tama was fond of Tsuruko's spiritual bird, Hayate. "Myu myu!"

"Chirp chirp!"

The two animals were having a lovely conversation, too, it seemed.

"Um, so you came for some work in Tokyo?" asked Shinobu, who was overwhelmed by Tsuruko's mature presence.

"Exactly."

"What sort of work was it?" Suu and Sara interjected.



Suu was holding a mysterious laser gun. Sara was holding a strange clay mask.

"I mean, you get rid of evil ghosts with spiritual weapons, right?" Suu asked. "Or, since they're haunting places, do you haunt them back?"

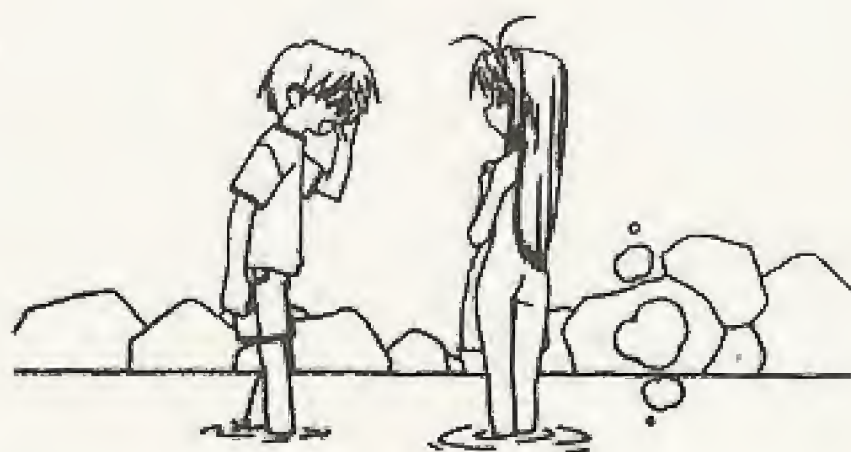
Sara held up the clay mask and yelped, "Boogeddy boogeddy boo!"

Tsuruko just chuckled. "We don't use mecha and we don't haunt ghosts," she explained. "We use three skills—*Sen*, *Jyu*, and *Gen*—depending on the situation. But we have our own, distinct ways to operate within the bounds of shin mei ryu."

"Like what? Can you show us?" The girls were entranced.

Tsuruko thought for a moment. "Sure," she said. "As payment for one night's stay, I will show you one of the most secret skills of shin mei ryu." She turned to her little sister, her eyes suddenly sharp. "Motoko," she said.

Motoko jumped as though the chair were electrified. "Y-yes? Huh?"



"Please prepare for *iki mitama utsushi*," Tsuruko commanded.

Motoko gulped. "Are you going to use that?!"

"Hurry." Tsuruko's eyes glinted.

Motoko moved at lightning speed to prepare for the impending display of skills.

Naru mumbled under her breath, while Kitsune and the other girls tilted their heads and wondered what would happen.

"What are they going to show us?" Kitsune asked, surveying the odd scene.

Sakaki tree branches were placed in all four directions, making a six-foot square. A seat cushion was placed inside it. In front of the box was purification sake placed on a square, ritual table. It was the same type of table used to place the knife on during a ritual suicide—very serious-looking.

Tsuruko sat on the center seat cushion. She meditated for a while. When she opened her eyes, she spoke to the girls softly. "The skill I am about to show you is one of the secret skills of *shin mei ryu*—the *iki mitama utsushi*, or Living Souls Exchange," she told them. "This skill is normally used to remove an evil spirit from a person that is too weak to handle it. The person's spirit that is under



attack would be removed from the weak body and stored in a healthy one in order to perform rituals to destroy the evil spirits left in the their body.”

Naru and the girls blinked, having a hard time understanding.

“You will comprehend it when you see it,” Tsuruko said. “May I please have two volunteers?”

Suu was beaming with excitement. “That sounds fun!” she said. “Let’s do it, Shinobu.”

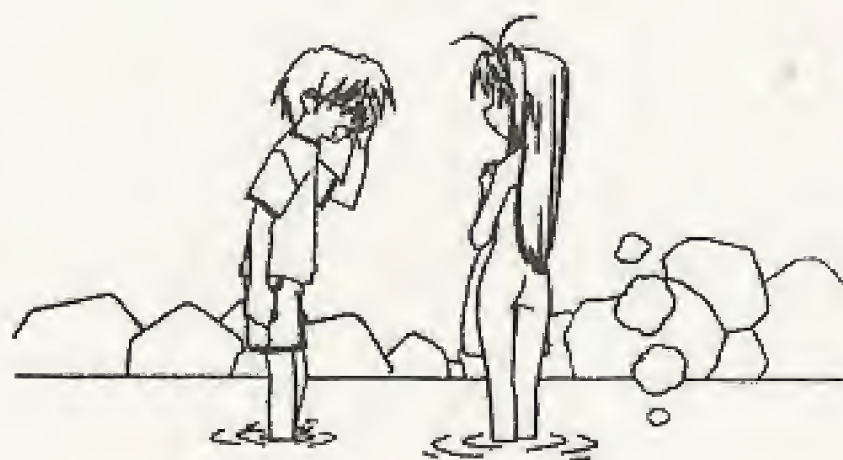
“Uh, I . . .” Shinobu tried to slide back, but Suu grabbed her by the collar.

“Motoko’s big sis is cool! We’ll do it!” Suu said.

“Oh dear, h-help me!” Shinobu flailed about while Suu dragged her forward.

“No worries,” Tsuruko reassured them. Her mature aura calmed Shinobu. “Well, let’s begin.”

Tsuruko quietly stood up and silently unsheathed her sword. She took the purification sake bottle, drank some, then spit onto the blade to moisten it. Then, holding the



sword in the center stance, she closed her eyes and chanted a secret spell. Her voice was low and hypnotic.

She slowly opened her eyes and shouted, "Eii!" Then she skimmed her blade to the left, directly above Shinobu's head.

Naru and the other girls gulped.

But Shinobu did not flail about as usual. She stayed put as if frozen.

Motoko whispered, "Shinobu's soul has been transferred into the sword. Look real close—can you see the white, blurry aura around the blade?"

They looked. Indeed, it was visible—a thin smoke twirled around the center of the blade.

"Eii!" Tsuruko cried, and with the same sideward movement, she transferred Suu's soul onto the sword, also. Tsuruko closed her eyes and concentrated, then opened her eyes to shout, "Hah!"

She swung the sword down in front of her.

The next moment, the smoke around the blade disappeared. At the same time, Suu and Shinobu opened their eyes.

Shinobu opened her smiling mouth and said, "Aw gee, is it over already?"

The voice and appearance was that of Shinobu, but the way she spoke was definitely like Suu.



Suu looked around nervously and asked, “Oh dear, it was scary . . .”

Again, the voice and appearance was that of Suu, but the way she spoke was definitely like Shinobu.

They both looked at each other and frowned, confused. “Huh?”

“What?”

“There’s two of me!”

“That person is like me!”

They couldn’t hide their surprise.

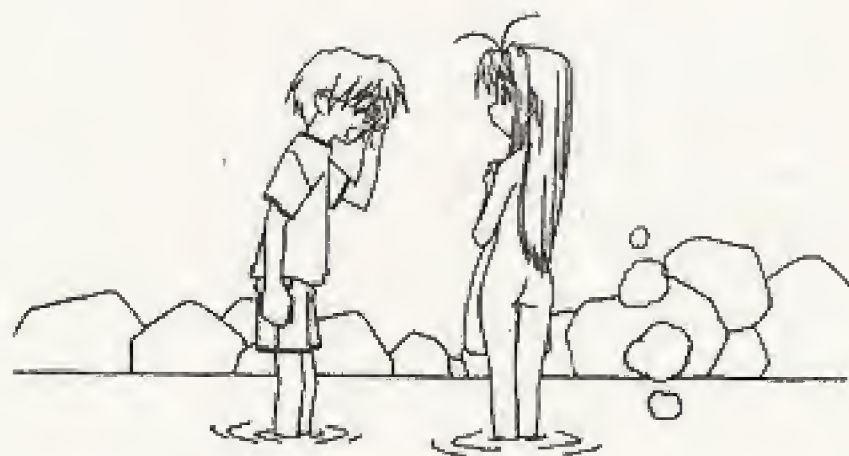
“Both of you, look in the mirror,” Tsuruko said, handing them a mirror that had been lying at her feet.

“Dude, I turned into Shinobu!” Suu exclaimed.

“And I turned into Kaolla!” Shinobu was laughing out loud—but really it was Suu inside, making Shinobu laugh.

Suu’s body fidgeted, uncomfortable.

“This is the shin mei ryu secret skill, Living Souls Exchange,” Tsuruko told them. “This is normally used to remove the haunted soul from a weak person and place



it into a healthy person that has already been selected for this purpose. Sometimes, if the evil spirit is too strong for anyone else, the soul is exchanged between the weak person and me."

Tsuruko was explaining it very calmly, but the Hinata House residents were panicked, no longer listening.

Shinobu, grasping at Suu's crumpled clothes, had tears welling up in her eyes. "Please help me!" she pleaded.

If she had looked like the delicate Shinobu, then anyone would have wanted to help her, but since she looked like the tanned, super-healthy Suu, the pleas just didn't seem convincing.

"Um, please calm down, okay, Suu?" Naru said.

"I'm *Shinobu*!"

On the other hand, Suu, looking like Shinobu, was busy whispering to Sara.

"How do you like Shinobu's body?" Tsuruko asked.

"It's not strong enough," she replied. "And the panties are a little tight."

"What kind of panties are you wearing?"

"Wanna see? Here." Suu, looking like Shinobu, raised her skirt up to her chest.

"Eek! Stop that!" Shinobu, inside of Suu, gasped with embarrassment.



"Oh, come on," Suu-Shinobu said. "You got nothing to lose by looking at it."

"Stop using my body like a toy!"

"What are you talking about? You mean like this?" Suu-Shinobu turned around and exposed her butt to everyone.

"Oh dear!" Shinobu-Suu fainted because she couldn't handle the thought of her body being toyed with like that.

"Wake up, Suu!" the girls all cried.

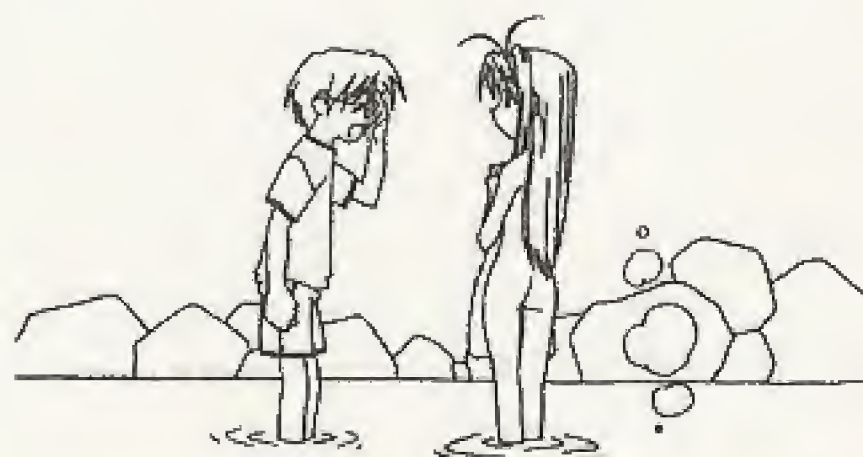
"What?" Suu-Shinobu asked.

"We meant Shinobu!" Naru hastily hugged her.

Motoko, looking ghastly, approached Tsuruko. "Big sister, maybe we should return them . . . ?"

"I suppose." Even the calm Tsuruko had broken out in a cold sweat, so she closed her eyes and started chanting the spell. She meditated for a bit. Then suddenly opened her eyes and said, "Kah!"

The next moment, a violent breeze whipped though the air, wrapping around Shinobu and Suu. The winds rose and then suddenly ceased.



"What?" Suu woke up first—and now sounded like herself.

"The spell has been broken," Tsuruko said. "Shinobu, though she is still unconscious, is back to being herself."

"Aw, is that *it*? I wanted to play some more!" Suu said. The only ones disappointed were Suu and Sara.

Naru and Motoko breathed a sigh of relief.

"Please take Shinobu back to her room so she can sleep," Naru requested. Suu and Sara obeyed.

"I'm so sorry," Tsuruko said, genuinely apologetic. "I meant to show the skill as an expression of gratitude, but it caused such a commotion."

Naru tried to reply, but Kitsune interjected, "Ma'am, may I ask one question?"

Kitsune was definitely up to something now.

Tsuruko smiled. "Yes, what is it?"

"Can Motoko use the same skill?"

Motoko gulped when she heard the question. "W-well I—" she tried to answer, but Tsuruko cut in.

"I wonder. If she has been training hard up until now, she should be able to do it already . . ."

Her sister's cold stare caused Motoko to deflate.

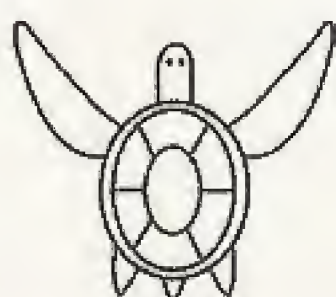
Kitsune threw in an evil suggestion. "Well, maybe we can have Motoko try the skill right now?"



Motoko was so surprised that she was almost passed out right there.

"That's a great idea!" Tsuruko said.

Upon hearing her sister's response, Motoko's face blanched.



And so it was that Motoko's Living Souls Exchange began.

The guinea pigs were Kitsune, the instigator, and Naru. If their souls were exchanged properly, then the experiment would be a success.

But Motoko was not up to it. She even felt a little anger toward Kitsune. If she failed in front of her sister, then the awaiting punishment would be torturous. But she couldn't refuse, because that would upset her sister as well, and she would get punished for *that*. There was no way out of this.

And besides, Motoko had never performed this ritual before. Or at least, she hadn't performed it on *humans*



before. She had experimented with animals during her training back in Kyoto. Because of that, there were rumors of a dog that curled up beside a sunny window, a chicken that flew like a pigeon, and a horse that excreted the pellet-like droppings of a deer.

“Well, Motoko, shall we start?” Tsuruko asked.

Motoko became even more nervous, walking as stiff as an old toy doll. She held her sword aloft.

But just then, something unexpected happened.

“Ow! Ow-ow!” Kitsune held her stomach and started to squirm.

“What’s wrong, Kitsune?” Naru asked.

Kitsune replied with a pained expression, “Well, I don’t know, but my stomach started hurting . . . Um, ow . . .”

Motoko and Naru glared at Kitsune. It was so obvious that she was faking it. They wondered who would fall for such a petty trick.

“Oh no, are you okay?” Tsuruko was completely fooled.

Naru and Motoko almost fell over in disbelief. They couldn’t help but think that after studying high up in the mountains of Kyoto, Tsuruko wasn’t used to be around tricksters like Kitsune.

“We shouldn’t use the skill on someone who is ill,” Tsuruko said.



"Then, can we cancel—?" Motoko started to ask, but Kitsune cut her off quickly.

"How about exchanging the souls of Naru and Motoko instead?"

"Uh . . . well . . ."

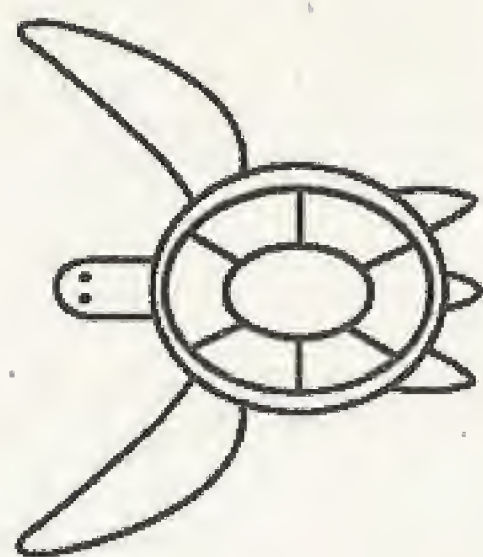
"Originally, when there were no available healthy bodies to be used in the Living Souls Exchange, the performer switched souls," Tsuruko said. "Try to switch souls between yourself and Narusegawa."

Motoko couldn't possibly refuse that order. "Yes, big sister," she replied, overwhelmed by Tsuruko's intensity.

Kitsune left, still holding her stomach, grinning slyly. "Good stuff," she muttered. "Everything is going as planned."







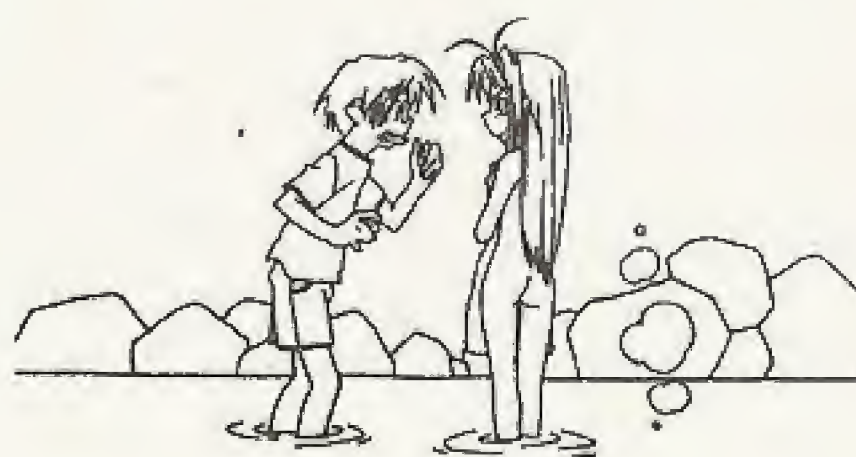
CHAPTER 3: MOTOKO'S BIG BLUNDER

Motoko swung the sword sideways, skimming over Narusegawa's head. "Towaaah!" The Living Souls Exchange was now in progress.

Kitsune, who was supposed to have gone back to her room with stomach pains, had instead hidden herself behind the cafeteria entrance. She tried hard to be quiet, knowing that Tsuruko had an overdeveloped sense of hearing.

Wispy white smoke wrapped around Motoko's sword as she raised it above her head to remove Naru's soul. She yelled, "Teyaaah!" and skimmed the sword in front of Naru's face, barely missing her throat.

The next moment, Motoko's eyes went milky white. From this point on it was an instinctual process.



Using a body emptied of its soul, Motoko had to switch the souls quickly. If someone trained long enough, it was an easy enough feat.

Motoko closed her eyes and paused. She finally opened her eyes and said, "Haaah!" and swung the sword down in front of her. The next moment, the white smoke surrounding the sword disappeared.

Naru thought, *Huh?* She could still see Motoko. If her soul was switched out with Motoko's, then Naru shouldn't still be seeing her.

Motoko, still holding the sword, was too shocked to move.

Trying to avoid being detected by Tsuruko, Kitsune waved her arms to tell the girls something. Naru noticed immediately that Kitsune was gesturing—trying to tell them not to anger Motoko's sister.

Naru understood—Motoko had probably messed up big time. The fact that she was still herself was proof enough, and Kitsune was trying to help Motoko out of trouble.

But, how could anyone cover this up?

Oh, we could pretend to be Suu and Shinobu a few minutes ago, she thought. She should act just like Motoko.

Tsuruko asked, "How did it go?"



“Yes-big-sister-it-went-very-well.” Naru tried to imitate Motoko as best she could. But it was like watching a novice actress just reading the lines, unable to truly perform.

Motoko, meanwhile, tried really hard to imitate Naru as well. “Wow, I-see-myself! I’m-so-surprised!”

She acted little better than Naru, which is to say, they both pretty much sucked at it. But since Tsuruko was easily fooled by Kitsune’s fake illness, she also fell for their ploy and smiled.

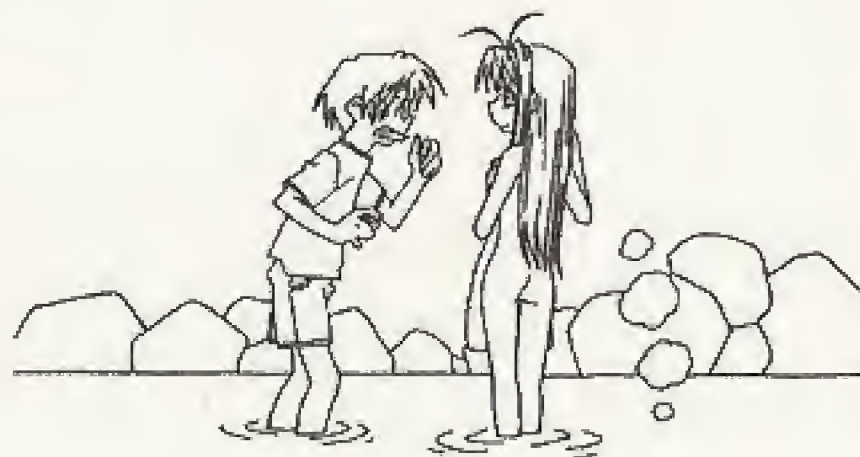
But then her eyes glinted. Naru and Motoko flinched, but Tsuruko’s hard stare was not toward them, but someone out in the area.

“Who is that?!” Tsuruko looked sternly behind her.

They turned to see Mutsumi wander over, smiling, as always. Tsuruko had sensed an evil monster or spirit’s presence, but once she realized that it was only Mutsumi, Tsuruko relaxed her stern face.

“You are Otohime, correct?” she asked.

“Oh my, this is the first time we met, but you are so right!” Mutsumi said.



"Motoko wrote about you in her letters."

The two greeted each other. Naru watched them talk, then asked, "Why did Mutsumi come here?"

Naru knew that Mutsumi was probably not the kind of person to just show up for no reason—she was up to something. But Naru couldn't figure out what it was.

"My store manager, Haruka Urashima, wanted to come meet you in person," Mutsumi offered innocently. "But the store is having some water pipes fixed, so she couldn't make it. So I came here in her place."

"Is that so?" Tsuruko said. "Then shall I go visit her?"

Mutsumi brightened. "Oh, the manager would enjoy that very much!" she said.

Tsuruko turned to Naru. "Motoko, I will be gone for a few minutes."

Naru remembered that she had to act like Motoko today. "S-s-sure," she said in her best Motoko-voice.

"Make sure you switch back the souls by the time I return, okay?"

Naru nodded, and so Tsuruko left with Mutsumi. After the footsteps trailed off, Kitsune wandered over to them.

Naru sighed and told Motoko, "Gosh, that was scary. I've never imitated you, so I was so nervous."



But, what came out of Motoko's mouth was shocking:
"That ain't it."

"Huh?" Naru was confused.

"It's me! Me! Don't you know?" Motoko was talking exactly like Kitsune.

Naru's eyes widened. "Don't tell me . . ."

"Absolutely," Kitsune answered sullenly, but it was Motoko inside. "Because I'm still a novice, I mistakenly switched souls between me and Kitsune!"

"Whaaat?!" Naru shouted.

Tsuruko poked her face back in the room. The three girls froze in place. "Is something wrong?" Tsuruko asked.

Naru answered, "Um, well, I'm supposed to be Narusegawa . . . right?" She was so confused that she spoke nonsense.

"Yes," Tsuruko said. She looked at Motoko. "Wow, sister, you already broke the spell?"

Kitsune poked Motoko, and she nodded heavily.

"I'm impressed," Tsuruko said.



Then Tsuruko pulled out a box of candy from her luggage and gave it to them. "I forgot to give you this. Here."

Motoko took the candy, nodding her thanks. Tsuruko smiled and left again.

Naru sighed in relief, then frowned. "Motoko and Kitsune, will you please tell me what's going on?"

"Well . . ." Motoko, inside Kitsune, tried to explain. Due to the lack of sleep and nervousness, compounded by her inexperience, Motoko's Living Souls Exchange was a great big blunder. Motoko and Naru's souls should have interchanged, but instead, the souls of Kitsune—who was watching from afar—and Motoko were interchanged by mistake.

"We need to hurry and switch back!" Naru told them.

Motoko, using Kitsune's body, nodded and started the spell. She meditated a bit. Then she opened her eyes and said, "Kah!"

The next moment, violent winds should have risen up. But they didn't.

Motoko, still inside of Kitsune, was flustered. "Crap! I'm not skilled enough!" She crumpled her hair, but because she was in Kitsune's body, it simply looked like she had lost a bet at the racetrack.

Kitsune, still stuck inside Motoko, just shrugged. "Oh well, stuff happens."



She sat down Indian-style and leaned back, but since she was in Motoko's body, it was a peculiar sight.

Motoko-Kitsune was irked, and a tear formed in the corner of her eye. "Why in the world did you make that suggestion to my big sister?!" she blurted.

"W-well . . ." Kitsune-Motoko hesitated for a moment, but decided to let it all out. "It was to let you pass the entrance exam."

"Huh?" Naru said, pretty much summing it up for all of them. "What do you mean, Kitsune?" She turned to Motoko. "Motoko, you're taking a college entrance exam next spring, right?"

"Yeah . . . ?"

"When Motoko's sister first performed the spell, I got a great idea," Kitsune-Motoko said. "If we used the spell, then taking the college entrance exam would be such a breeze . . . I thought if, on the day of the exams, we used the Living Souls Exchange to switch Naru and Motoko's souls, then Naru could take Motoko's exam . . ."



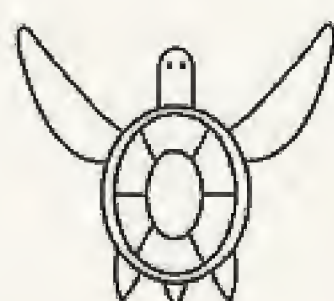
They looked at Kitsune-Motoko like she was nuts, but to her it made perfect sense. She rolled her eyes. "Naru is currently a student of the top-notch Tokyo University, right?" she said. "I don't know which college Motoko was aiming for, but Naru could take any college entrance exam in Japan and pass without any problems. That's why I wanted to test it before the big day. So I acted like my stomach hurt to get out of being a guinea pig, and I figured you guys would figure it out."

"Kitsune—" Motoko-Kitsune began. She understood that Kitsune cared for her, so she couldn't really get upset. "I appreciate your feelings, but this method is sort of, um, illegal, isn't it?"

Kitsune-Motoko shrugged. "Whatever," she said.

Just then, Tsuruko came back from visiting Haruka. "Well, this has been great, but I must return home to Kyoto," she told them. "But, Naru, may I ask for one last thing?"

Naru looked at her nervously. "Y-yes?"



Tsuruko's final request was to use the hot springs. As she settled into the hot water, her beautiful pale skin turned a little rosy. She let out a pleased sigh.



“Oh, this feels so good,” she said. “When I last took a bath here, I really fell in love with the hot springs.”

Naru, Motoko, and Kitsune joined her in the bath. Tsuruko insisted on having them relax with her, so they couldn't possibly refuse. But even if they were in a warm bath, the girls felt a little chilly. If Tsuruko found out about Motoko's blunder, who knew how angry she would get? They just had to maintain the ruse a little longer, and really, how hard could that be?

But then an unexpected guest appeared to join them.

“Myu.” When Tama the hot springs turtle noticed the girls, it approached them for some food. Tama was everyone's favorite—with one rather glaring exception.

“Ugh!” Kitsune, with Motoko inside her, flinched. But she couldn't react while in this body, because her sister might discover the truth. She had to bear it, so she laughed nervously.

Naru noticed Kitsune-Motoko's reaction and saw Tama coming, so she looked for a way to warn Kitsune. But then



Naru remembered—yesterday, Tsuruko was able to hear their tiniest their whispers.

So what now? While her mind raced for a solution, Tama got closer and closer. The real Motoko was reaching her limit, so Naru made a bold move.

“Hey guys, let’s see who can hold their breath the longest!” she said.

“Huh?”

“Ready, go!” Naru dragged Kitsune-Motoko into the water with her, then opened her mouth underwater to warn about the coming danger. “Tama . . . *glub* . . . is . . . *glub* . . . coming . . . *glub glub* . . . this way . . . *glub!*”

“Wha . . . *glub glub* . . . aaat . . . *glub?!*”

“You have to . . . *glub* . . . act scared . . . *glub glub* . . . or else . . . *glub* . . . she’ll be suspicious . . . *glub!* Motoko . . . *glub glub glub* . . . is about to . . . *glub* . . . reach her limit . . . *glub* . . . too!”

“I got . . . *glub* . . . it! Leave it . . . *glub glub* . . . to me!”

Kitsune, as Motoko, pulled her head out of the water and yelled, “Eek! Don’t come here, Tama!” and went to Tama to grab his shell.

“Myu?” Tama said.

“No! Let go! Let me go!” Kitsune, as Motoko, yelled, clutching Tama, running around like a mad woman.



As bad acting goes, it could have won a prize. “Oh, Motoko is still afraid of turtles, eh?” commented Tsuruko, who was easily convinced.

Kitsune ran into the changing room. But then she came back the next moment and said, “Big sister, please be happy. I got rid of the creature.”

“I’m so proud, Motoko. So you have overcome your fear of turtles, too?”

“Y-yes.”

“Shall I scrub your back as a reward?”

“N-no, you don’t have to!” Kitsune, as Motoko, hastily declined. If she was asked any more questions, her cover would be blown. “I appreciate the thought, though.”

“Are you sure?”

Kitsune just nodded with Motoko’s head.

Motoko-Kitsune felt really weird. This was probably the first time in her life that she had inspected her own body this much. It seemed more frail than when she looked at herself in the mirror. Her breasts were a little larger than



she'd realized, too. She didn't look quite as sensually mature as her sister, but because Kitsune was inside her body, her movements seemed more confident and feminine. In fact, with Kitsune in charge, she was kind of a babe.

Kitsune-Motoko noticed her staring. Knowing that Tsuruko wasn't looking, Kitsune-Motoko grinned and made sexy poses like a pinup model, particularly enjoying how it made Motoko-Kitsune squirm.

Motoko-Kitsune stood up to yell, but realized her mistake and said, "Enough of that, Motoko. If you scrub yourself too hard your skin will rub off."

Naru quickly joined the conversation. "It's not good to scrub that hard," she offered.

"I wasn't talking about just her skin. Motoko is too rough about everything," Tsuruko said.

"Rough . . . ?"

Tsuruko nodded. "Motoko is too stiff. The thoughts girls of her age have . . . like wanting to play with friends . . . wanting a boyfriend . . . going to college . . . every time she has those desires, she causes a commotion to distract herself. She's too severe on herself."

"But Motoko is trying so hard to take after the shin mei ryu way!" Motoko, in Kitsune's body, used this opportunity to voice her feelings.



Tsuruko looked at Motoko-Kitsune, and said, "Kitsune, you always seem to take Motoko's side."

Motoko-Kitsune was flustered. She covered frantically. "Y-yeah, I'm Kitsune. And I really like Motoko."

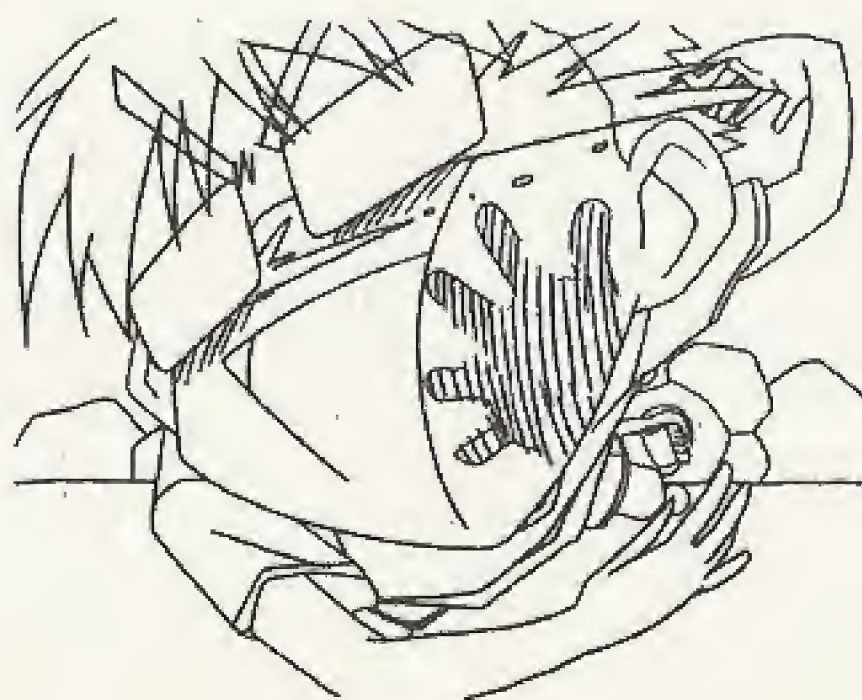
Kitsune, still inside of Motoko, had gone back to the wash area and couldn't hear the conversation. She was taking her time washing Motoko's body.

Tsuruko looked at Motoko-Kitsune, and said, "Please don't tell Motoko."

Motoko-Kitsune nodded with mixed emotions. Naru also listened in as Tsuruko explained.

"People have superficial and true feelings. As a follower of shin mei ryu, I think I should be stricter with Motoko. But when I look at her, I feel she has a lonely, cold winter wind blowing through her heart. After I married, a warm spring breeze welled up inside me. Like how a flower reaches out to the sun and blooms. I was able to open up my heart."

"Open . . . your heart . . ." Motoko, inside of Kitsune, repeated those words.

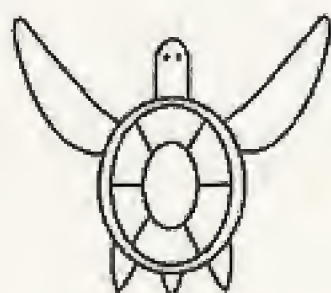


"Motoko needs to open her heart," Tsuruko confided. "She needs to smile like a warm spring breeze. Well, she's had a rough life so far, so I don't expect to have her change overnight. I was actually just hoping that something would change if she started college . . . These are my true feelings as her sister."

Motoko-Kitsune looked over to the wash area again. Kitsune-Motoko was washing her hair. It was hard to know just by looking at her pale back if a cold winter wind was blowing through her heart. But there was definitely no warm spring breeze blowing there. Never had been.

"So Kitsune, Naru . . . please take care of Motoko?" Tsuruko bowed her head, so Naru and Motoko, secretly within Kitsune, nervously bowed back.

Tsuruko seemed relieved and smiled to say, "Well, I must go home now."



Back inside, the spiritual bird Hayate flapped its wings and landed on Tsuruko's shoulder.

"Everyone, thank you for having me," Tsuruko said. She smiled and bade farewell to all the residents of the Hinata House. "Well, Motoko . . ."



Motoko-Kitsune looked back at Tsuruko. Kitsune-Motoko just stared blankly back. This was getting really confusing, even for them.

“What are you looking at?” asked Tsuruko, and Kitsune-Motoko came to.

“Y-yes, big sister?”

“Good luck with your college entrance exams.”

“Thank you very much.”

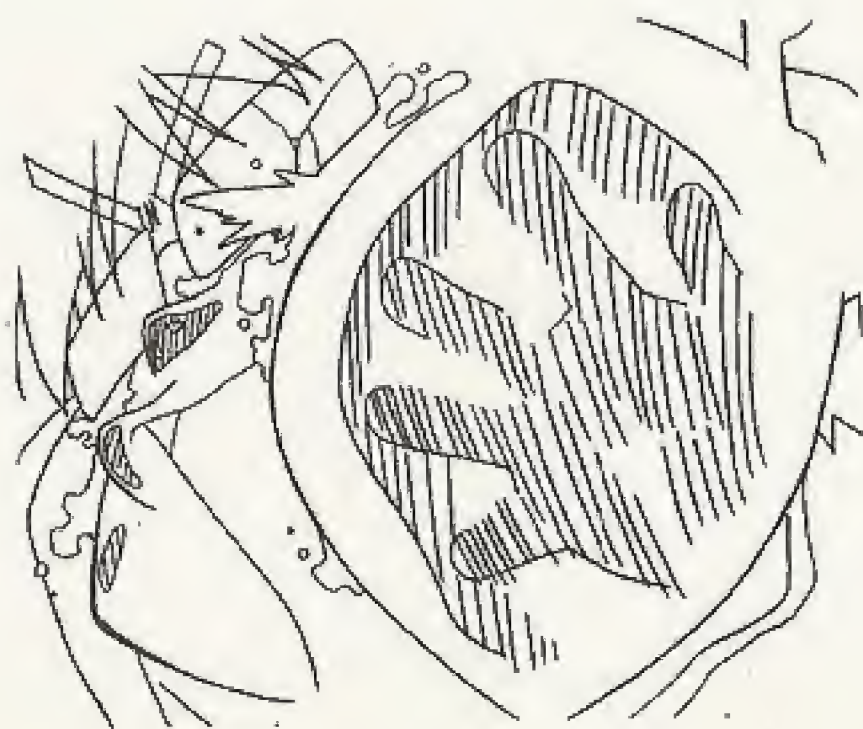
“If you fail the college entrance exam, then . . .”
Tsuruko’s eyes gleamed, but it wasn’t only her eyes—her mouth suddenly widened and a monstrous aura pulsed from her body. The nice, gentle sister wasn’t there anymore.

Naru and the girls gulped at the instant change.

“Understood, Motoko?”

“Yessss!” Kitsune-Motoko was half-crying as she answered.

Motoko-Kitsune watched from the side, chills going up and down her spine. Motoko felt that she had to pass the college entrance exams or else she was doomed.



Tsuruko's face transformed back to normal. "Well, see you later," she said, smiling sweetly. She sprinted off with great agility and quickly disappeared.

"Goodbye!"

"Please come again!" Sara and Suu waved.

Naru and the other girls sighed in relief.

"Whew, that was close . . ." Kitsune-Motoko said.

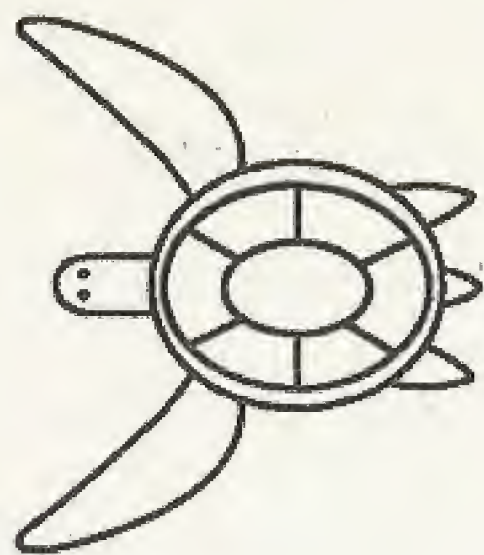
"I think my life was cut short," Motoko-Kitsune gasped, sagging.

"Well, it's over now. The end," Naru said, still surprised they had pulled it off.

The girls were all smiling. But it wasn't over quite yet.

"Oh, no! We need to get back into our bodies!" Motoko and Kitsune both cried as they ran in frantic circles. "We must break the spell!"

But how?



CHAPTER 4: CRAZY KITSUNE

Motoko, still stuck in Kitsune's body, called from deep in the closet, "Here it is! This!"

Naru and Kitsune (who was still stuck inside Motoko's body) leaned forward. After Tsuruko left, the three were looking for ways to break the shin mei ryu Living Souls Exchange by thumbing through old books in Motoko's room.

Motoko-Kitsune poked her head out of the closet, wiped off the cobwebs caught in her hair, and said, "This is the book."

On the cover was "Shin Mei Ryu: Book of Spell Breakers." The other two girls opened it up, but the cryptic characters made it difficult to read.



"What's it written in?" Kitsune-Motoko asked.

"Not sure," Naru said, genuinely perplexed.

"You can't read it, even though you're a Todai student?"

Motoko-Kitsune took the book and said, "It was written so you can't understand it. Since the skills of shin mei ryu are secret, it was written so that only my family can read it."

"Well, I'll be darned." Kitsune-Motoko huffed.

"So, how do we break the spell?" asked Naru.

Motoko-Kitsune opened the book in the middle. "Here's a section about a way to break the spell of the Living Souls Exchange in cases of emergencies," she said.

"What's it say?" Kitsune-Motoko asked. She seemed kind of antsy to get back into her own body.

"Well, it's kind of long," Motoko-Kitsune began, "but to it says 'One: the two switched souls must take a bath to purify the bodies . . .'"

"Again?" Kitsune-Motoko complained, scrunching up her nose. "But my—I mean, your—fingers are all pruny!"

"Shh!" Naru hushed her; then she said to Motoko-Kitsune, "Go on . . ."

Motoko-Kitsune nodded and continued reading. "'Two: prepare the blade used for the Living Souls Exchange,'" she read. "'Three: the two purified bodies must be naked and go



into the futon together. Four: put the sword in the futon and have both bodies grab the sheath . . . ’ ”

“Oh, kinky . . .” Kitsune-Motoko teased.

Naru jabbed her with an elbow. “Is that it?” she asked.

Motoko-Kitsune read the bottom of the page. “It says that by the next morning the souls will be back in their respective bodies.”

Kitsune-Motoko clapped her hands and exclaimed, “Okay! So me and Motoko will embrace while naked, right?”

“D-don’t say it in such a questionable manner!” Motoko-Kitsune shouted.

It was really strange to see the two interact, because “Kitsune” was the one being embarrassed, and “Motoko” was the one laughing. Naru wasn’t used to seeing this.

Motoko-Kitsune turned the page. “Uh-oh,” she said.

“What?” both girls asked.

“It says, this method only works the first night,” Motoko-Kitsune told them, her eyes wide. She looked up from the book. “After tonight, it will be impossible to go back.”



"What happens if it fails?" Naru asked.

"If that happens, we must ask a monster hunter as skilled as my sister," Motoko-Kitsune said, looking queasy. "But no one else in the family is as skilled as my sister."

"So, the only person we can ask is your sister?" Kitsune-Motoko said.

"We can't do that!" Motoko-Kitsune gasped. "If we did, who knows what the punishment for lying will be?"

"Does the punishment taste good?" someone asked.

"Well, big sister's punishment is . . . Suu!" Motoko-Kitsune was startled. Suu and Sara had somehow slipped in during the conversation.

"What's up, Kitsune? You sound different."

"Well, actually . . ."

Motoko-Kitsune tried to explain, but Naru grabbed her and whispered in her ear, "No, don't tell them."

"Why not?"

"If Suu finds out, she'll make some weird invention and it will just complicate things," Naru warned.

"Oh, right." Motoko-Kitsune went back to imitating Kitsune's speech patterns like she did in front of her sister. "I-I don't sound no different, do I?"

"I dunno. It's sort of weird," Suu said. "What do you think, Motoko?"



Kitsune-Motoko was asked that out of the blue, so she hastily responded, “I-I-I dunno. I really don’t think so.”

Suu became even more suspicious.

Naru quickly tried to change the subject. “So, what brings you here?”

“Shinobu was looking for you,” Suu explained. “She wants to study.”

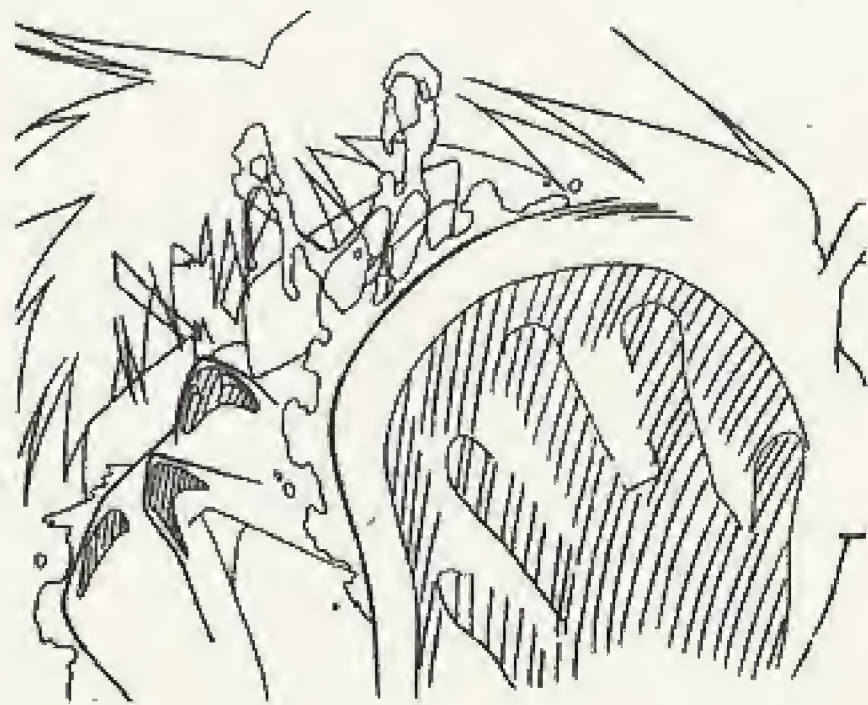
“Oh, I forgot!” Naru said. “I was supposed to tutor Shinobu today.” Then something crossed her mind, and she continued, “Motoko, would you like to study with us today?”

Kitsune-Motoko saw through Naru’s plan. She had to play along so Suu wouldn’t get suspicious.

“O-okay. I’ll do it, Naru,” she said. Kitsune-Motoko left the room with Naru.

Motoko-Kitsune turned to the girls. “Well, guess I’ll go back to my room and chill out,” she said, and quickly left.

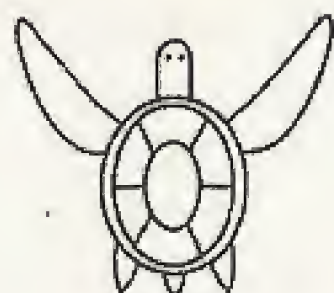
Suu and Sara just stood there. “There’s something definitely wrong with those two,” Suu said.



"Whatever, Kaolla. Let's play outside."

"Gotcha!"

They had been fooled by Naru's plan.



Kitsune-Motoko started to study with Shinobu in Naru's room. And she really *had* to study, because Naru had come up with a peculiar idea.

"Motoko, how about you try some high school problems for a change?"

"Huh?" Kitsune asked in Motoko's body.

"Maybe you should try junior high school problems, too. You don't play around like Kitsune, so you should breeze right through these problems."

Kitsune-Motoko was shocked. It was like Naru really wanted her to study. She became irritated, but since Shinobu was there, she couldn't talk back. She was stuck.

It had been years since Kitsune had opened up a textbook. The smell of ink reminded her of her school days, and the writing utensils Naru handed her seemed so nostalgic. Kitsune usually used only a red pencil to circle things on the horseracing forms. But back when she was a student, she actually used cute mechanical pencils and highlighters.



“Um, Naru, I don’t understand this question,” Shinobu murmured.

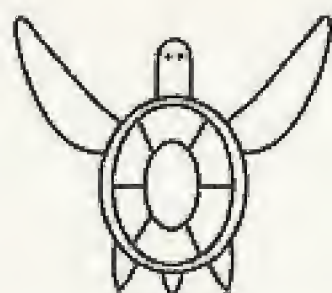
“Let me see,” Naru said. Shinobu and Naru were seriously engaged. They weren’t smiling, but they did seem to enjoy it.

“I didn’t know about this part of the academic world,” Kitsune uttered, but Naru and Shinobu looked at her, surprised. She had forgotten to act like Motoko because she was deep in thought.

Kitsune-Motoko tried to shake it off by saying, “That’s probably something Kitsune would have said.”

Shinobu nodded. Naru rolled her eyes.

This was going to be a long night.



Back in Kitsune’s room, Motoko used Kitsune’s body to pace nervously. This was a big, big problem. She didn’t even want to think about what would happen if she screwed it up.



Finally, after it was clear she might burn holes in the floor from her furious pacing, she sat down to meditate.

She had to calm down.

"Oh, I can't!" she said, heaving a tremendous sigh. She opened her eyes. It couldn't be helped. Kitsune's room was too messy. And the things strewn about were very questionable. There were empty beer cans and alcohol bottles, bits of half-eaten snacks, crumpled horserace forms, and other gambling periodicals strewn about. There were also the types of weekly magazines that a fifty-year-old businessman might read, so this room didn't seem like a young girl lived in it at all.

It was just impossible to meditate amidst all the artifacts of excess and earthly desire.

"I quit!"

Motoko-Kitsune flopped back and spread her arms and legs. Her hand—or rather, Kitsune's hand—brushed against a magazine. She picked it up.

"'Find the virgin out of all these college girls!'" she read, disgusted. Kitsune had made red circles throughout this black and white porny article.

"Why is she taking this article seriously?" Motoko wondered aloud. She threw the magazine to the side and stared at the ceiling.



She could hear Suu and Sara laughing and enjoying themselves downstairs. *They're probably playing with Tama*, she thought. She heard a vendor truck selling hot potatoes drive by. Weirdly, for all of her anxiety and frustration, she realized it had been a while since she had done nothing and relaxed like this.

She yawned and stretched Kitsune's body as if she were a lazy cat in a patch of sunshine. Kitsune's body was so much more limber than hers; it was kind of a nice feeling. Come to think of it, she hadn't slept much since her sister had arrived.

"Guess I'll take a nap," she mumbled, and reached for a pillow. But suddenly she jumped back when she saw the cover of a magazine hidden underneath it

Forbidden Love! Loving a Teenage Boyfriend!

Motoko-Kitsune was holding a hardcore ladies' comic, *The Monthly Amore*.

"Such filthy magazines!" Motoko-Kitsune blushed, and flung it aside. But . . . if she was honest with herself, she had



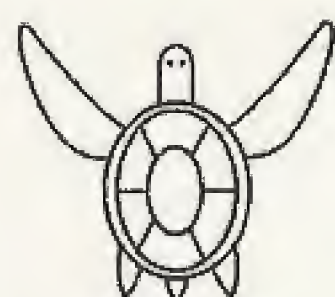
to admit she was a wee bit curious. Well, okay, so she was really curious.

“Let me just see inside the cover . . .”

Motoko-Kitsune cautiously crawled to the magazine and flipped the cover open. She saw two hardcore pinups—nothing gross or anything, but even for a ladies’ comic it was pretty racy—foreign models in hot sexy poses.

She squeaked and dropped the magazine. “I’m not going to look at it anymore,” she told herself. But she was still curious. And really, what would Kitsune do?

Motoko picked the magazine up again, skin flushed with excitement, and started to read.



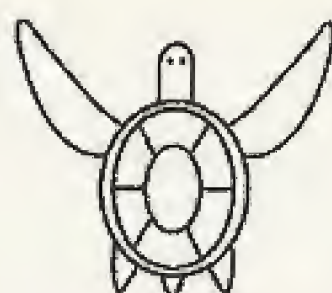
An hour later, after going back and forth, Motoko had read *The Monthly Amore* from cover to cover, from the readers’ number one manga title *Endless Love* to ads that boasted “My Breasts Grew Big With This Machine.”

And her reaction was simply: *pheew*.

Motoko’s eyes were glazed over; she stared blankly into space. It was too stimulating for her. She finally came to, took a deep breath, and said, “I didn’t know about this part of the non-academic world . . .”



But it certainly was an educational experience.



At that same time, Kitsune-Motoko was about to spew steam from both ears.

Her brain had broken down. It couldn't be helped, since she had been forced to study for more than two hours straight. She was sweating all over, and her face oscillated from red to green, like a traffic light.

Shinobu noticed her reactions and asked, "A-are you okay?"

Naru finally glanced over and said, "Maybe we should take a break."

"Yes, thank you," Kitsune-Motoko said. Once she wobbled out of the room, she let out all her repressed feelings. "Enough! I can't keep imitating Motoko like this! I can't live like Motoko or Naru."

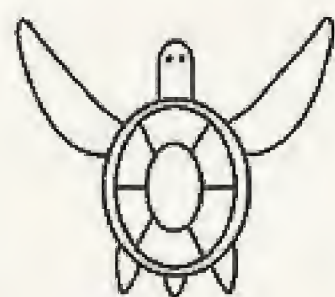
Suddenly, Tama floated over. "Myu?"



"Hey Tama!" she said. "You sure don't do much of anything. You're a floater, like me."

"Myu?" Tama was puzzled to see Motoko reacting differently than usual, so he tilted his head.

But Kitsune, in Motoko's body, was pretty puzzled, too. "Wait a minute. What is this? Looking at Tama, I can't help but wonder if I'm forgetting something big . . ." It finally dawned on Kitsune-Motoko. "Oh yeah! *Usagi to Kame!*"



Kitsune-Motoko ran to her room . . . in other words, *Kitsune's* room. Motoko-Kitsune was there, still thinking about *The Monthly Amore*.

Even though no one asked her about it, Motoko-Kitsune suddenly blurted out, "K-Kitsune, I did not read *The Monthly Amore!*"

But Kitsune-Motoko didn't seem to care and started throwing out clothes and underwear from her drawers.

"W-what's wrong?" Motoko-Kitsune asked.

Kitsune-Motoko didn't respond and started to take off her kimono.

"Um . . ." Motoko-Kitsune didn't know what to do as Kitsune-Motoko stripped down completely and picked out a



flashy negligee from the mess. She slipped it on, then put on a micro-miniskirt that was closer to her crotch than her knees, and an open-neck angora sweater.

As a finishing touch, she pulled on a leather jacket and said, "Okay, I'm ready to go!"

Motoko-Kitsune croaked. She was shocked to admit that her body looked pretty hot under Kitsune's control, but what Kitsune had put on was way more daring than any of the girls in town would ever even try.

She shook it off and asked, "What's going on, Kitsune?"

"I'm going out tonight!"

"G-going out?!"

"Need some fun! See ya!"

And with that, Kitsune-Motoko bolted out of the room.

It took a few seconds to set in, but then Motoko-Kitsune gasped. "Oh no!" she cried, and chased after her.

Motoko-Kitsune finally caught up with Kitsune-Motoko at the front entrance of the Hinata House and called out, "Kitsune! Don't go!"



But Kitsune-Motoko ignored her and tried to leave.

Motoko-Kitsune ran in front of her, and they faced off at the front entrance. "Please don't go out today," she begged. "If we don't do this tonight, we can't ever go back!"

"No! I want to go out!"

Motoko-Kitsune grabbed a broom and held it like a sword. "If you insist, then I must stop you by force!" she said with a stern face.

"Try me!" Kitsune-Motoko grabbed a rake and attacked.

Motoko-Kitsune stayed calm and tried to read her moves. But she couldn't.

"W-why?!" Motoko-Kitsune uttered in surprised. "Oh gosh! I can't use my skills with this body!"

And it was true—Motoko had trained hard over the years, but she was now in Kitsune's body. And the fact that Kitsune was using Motoko's body meant that, despite the random swings, Kitsune's moves were a lot sharper.

"Hey! The girls are fighting!" Suu and Sara rushed over to the scene. They didn't try to stop it, but rather cheered them on.

"Don't lose, Kitsune!"

"I'll cheer for Motoko! Do it, Motoko! Beat the crap out of her like you always do!"



Kitsune-Motoko stopped when she noticed the younger girls; she held the rake at the center stance. “*What* did you just say?”

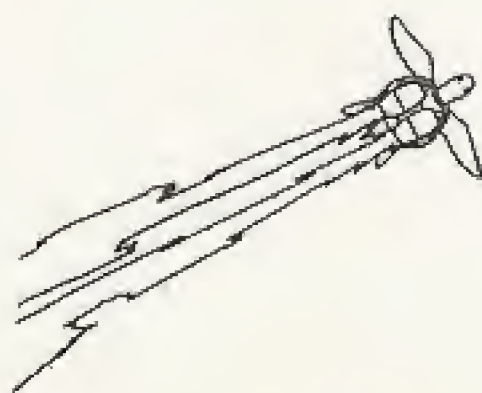
Motoko-Kitsune’s eyes widened. Had Kitsune not realized yet that she could use Motoko’s skills while in her body?

“Won’t know until I try it. Eat this secret move!” Kitsune-Motoko raised the rake and swung down while yelling, “Kitsune Secret Skill! Earthly Desires Sword, Lustful Swing!”

Motoko had never heard of that skill, of course. Kitsune just copied Motoko’s moves and said a bunch of nonsense. But even so, Motoko’s real body responded to Kitsune’s ridiculous chant. Kitsune’s aura of earthly desires were absorbed by the weapon, and Motoko’s trained body swung down, releasing a powerfully bright burst of energy.

Motoko tried to dodge it, but Kitsune’s body couldn’t respond fast enough.

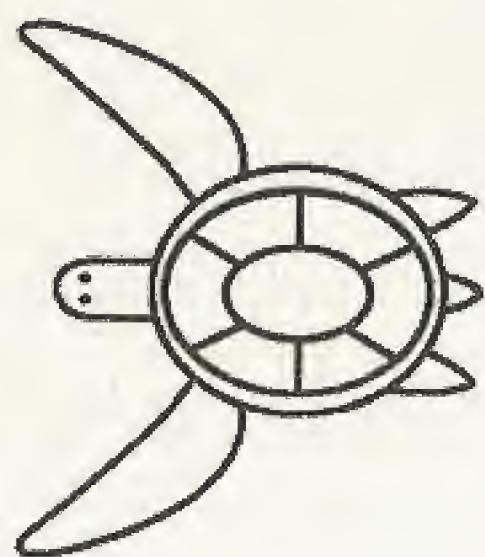
A bright flash of light came closer, followed by a huge explosion! A loud thunderous roar accompanied the large



flash, then everything went quiet.

“My . . . loss . . .” said Motoko-Kitsune, falling.

Kitsune-Motoko dropped the rake and took off toward the entertainment district.



CHAPTER 5: LET'S GO PARTY!

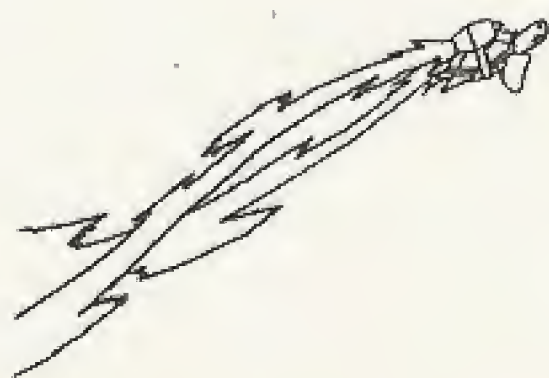
Motoko, in Kitsune's body, nervously entered the downtown area. Naru walked cautiously beside her.

There were neon signs everywhere; male employees tried to lure customers into seedy clubs and female hostesses strutted around provocatively. Because the end of the year was drawing close, many businessmen were hanging around after their year-end parties, looking for a good spot for a second round of drinks.

"Will we be able to find Kitsune?" Motoko asked.

"Don't worry. I think I might know where she is," Naru reassured.

Doing the laundry was one of the manager's duties, or rather, the substitute manager's duties. She needed to



check for items in the pockets before throwing clothes in the wash. There were several matchboxes with specific clubs' names that always came out of Kitsune's pockets. After doing the laundry for a while, Naru had simply memorized the names.

"We can only count on your memory, Naru," Motoko-Kitsune said.

If they couldn't switch back tonight, Tsuruko's severe punishment awaited Motoko, so Motoko lowered her head and silently prayed that they'd find that sly fox.

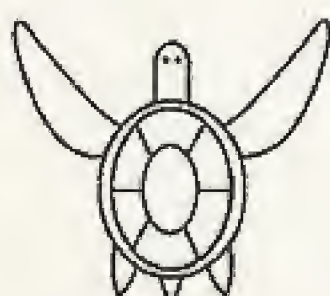
First they checked out a casual restaurant, then a sports bar, but Kitsune-Motoko was nowhere to be seen. The third place was a local bar, but it had been closed down for two weeks.

The fourth place was called The Fancy Madam.

"What type of place is this?" Motoko-Kitsune asked.

"I don't know," Naru said. "The matchbox only had the name on it."

The two girls desperately searched for The Fancy Madam. They had no time to waste.



"Welcome!"



When they opened the door a young man who looked like Brad Pitt approached them. Naru and Motoko-Kitsune braced themselves.

They had found The Fancy Madam. It didn't look so glamorous on the outside, but the inside was absolutely dazzling. The place had twinkling lights and young, hunky guys—barely legal, it seemed—in handsome suits all lined up to greet them.

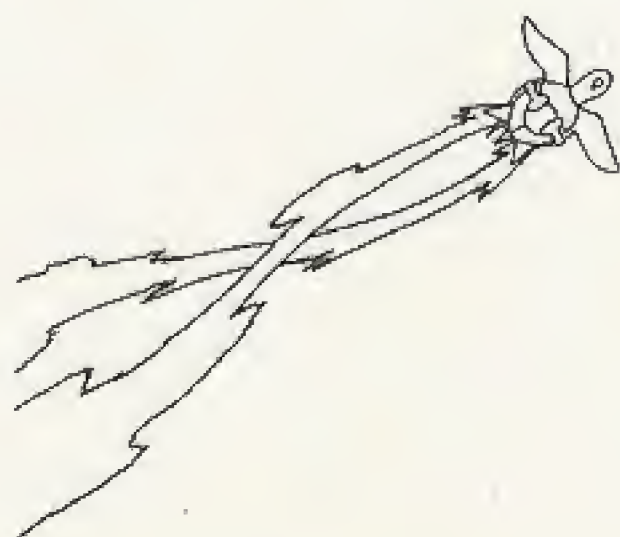
"What *is* this place?!" Motoko-Kitsune gasped, just overwhelmed at the sight.

Naru wasn't as surprised as Motoko, though. "It's a host club!" she said. Naru knew that these kinds of places existed, but this was the first time she'd ever been in one.

The buff young male employees went wild as soon as they saw Motoko, thinking she was actually Kitsune. "Kitsune, welcome back! Please come in!"

"No, I'm—"

"Oh, you brought someone with you? Please come in."



“Um, we’re looking for someone . . .”

The employees didn’t listen and literally dragged them into the club. Apparently, Kitsune was one of their regular customers. They happily greeted the girls.

“It’s been a while, Kitsune!”

“Welcome, Kitsune!”

“Please come this way.”

The one who first greeted them (who really did look like Brad Pitt) showed them to a large booth. The other boys came, took a knee, offered a warm hand towel, and said hello. Naru and Motoko hesitated, but since the boys stayed in that position, they ended up taking the towels.

“Brad” came back with a bottle. “Kitsune, our normal greeting,” he said, and touched Motoko-Kitsune’s breast with his right hand.

Motoko-Kitsune was shocked.

“This is a freebie,” Brad said with a wink, placing his other hand on her other breast.

Next, he touched Naru’s breasts. Naru twitched a little.

But it was weird—even though a strange guy was feeling them up, Naru and Motoko somehow didn’t feel offended. When the Brad Pitt look-alike saw Naru’s puzzled expression, he said, “Oh no, Kitsune. You should have explained to your friend what this place is like.”



"S-sorry," Motoko-Kitsune replied.

The young man explained, "You're mistaking our club for a host club, right? But it isn't."

"Really?" Naru said.

"All our employees are female." He winked again. It took a moment to sink in.

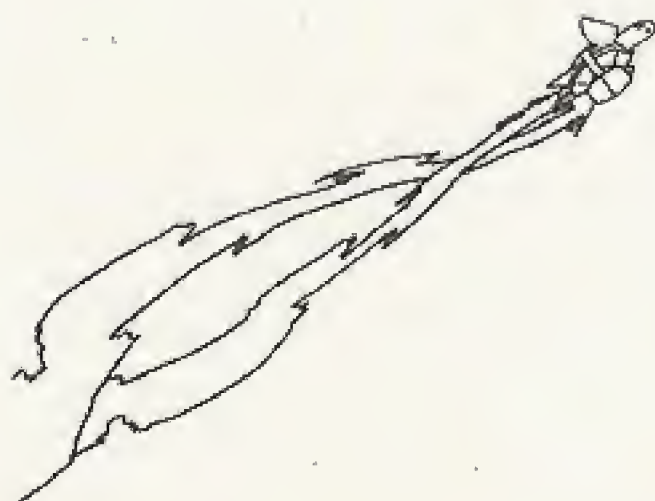
"What?!" Naru raised her voice in surprise.

Motoko-Kitsune was about to freak out, too. They looked at the beautiful boy—no, girl. Upon closer inspection, all the guys here did seem more delicate than a normal male, and they moved with a certain grace.

"Brad" was a girl too, so Naru and Motoko didn't feel all that offended by her touch. They breathed a sigh of relief.

"Well, let's take a break and have some drinks," Naru suggested.

Naru had become curious, but Motoko was still a bit uncomfortable—on the surface. Actually, she was very excited about this first experience but didn't have the courage to express that.



"But, this place isn't . . ." she began, then stopped. It was then that she remembered her sister's comment.

Motoko is too stiff . . .

Motoko took a deep breath. She did not look like Motoko Aoyama right now. She was Kitsune—wild, exciting, crazy Kitsune. If she couldn't change herself now, then when?

"I guess so," she said. "Let's take a break, okay?"

"Motoko?" Naru began.

"I'm not Motoko," she replied. "As you can see, I'm Kitsune."

Motoko-Kitsune grinned just like Kitsune would, but the smile still had some of Motoko in it.

Naru smiled back. The two decided to rest for a while. Naru drank a rum and soda, and Motoko-Kitsune ordered some hot Japanese tea.

"Kitsune, do you have a hangover again?" the Brad-girl chided. Fortunately, even though Motoko ordered hot tea, no one was suspicious of her real identity.

They spent about an hour there chatting with the guys . . . or rather, the girls. The conversations sounded like girls' locker room talk.

"Talking about all kinds of things at this sort of club is kinda fun," Motoko-Kitsune remarked.



Suddenly, the karaoke started a song that had recently topped the charts.

“Let’s get started!” A girl from a different booth whooped and ran to the stage.

Motoko recognized that figure. She was wearing a micro-miniskirt and an angora sweater. And of course, she sported Motoko’s own face.

“Naru! There! It’s Kitsune!”

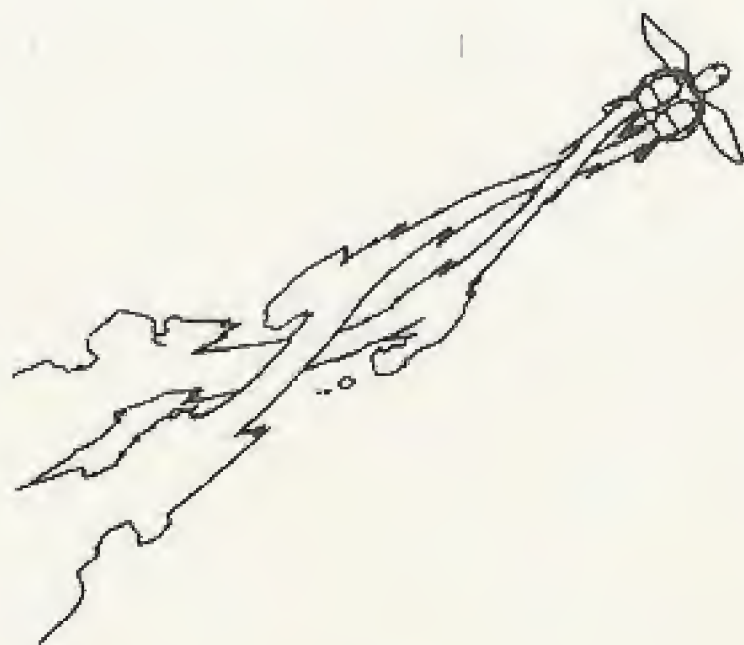
Kitsune-Motoko held the microphone.

Naru tried to call out, but Motoko-Kitsune suddenly stopped her. “Why, Motoko?”

“Please let me watch for a bit,” she whispered shyly. Her eyes twinkled brightly. “I’ve never seen me like this! I want to see how I enjoy myself.”

“Motoko . . .”

Up on the little stage, Kitsune was singing and entertaining everyone while in Motoko’s body. The employees rang tambourines and bells and cheered her on. Kitsune was happy, and she even did some dance moves during the song.



Motoko looked at her own body and was reminded of her older sister's smile, back when they were children and more carefree with each other.

Motoko was also reminded of Tsuruko's words: *Motoko needs to open her heart . . . She needs to smile like a warm spring breeze . . .*

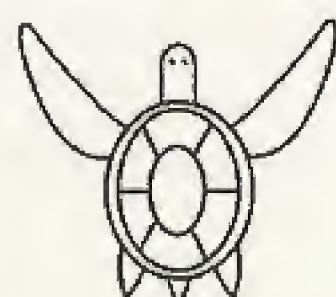
After Kitsune-Motoko finished the song, there was loud applause.

Motoko-Kitsune slowly stood up. "Motoko, we've come for you," she said.

"Ah, Motoko—" Kitsune-Motoko was taken by surprise; she looked worried that the girls might be angry.

But Motoko-Kitsune just smiled and said sincerely, "I really saw something good today. I feel like a warm spring breeze."

This new Motoko was very nice to see.



Naru and the girls didn't return to the Hinata House right away.

Kitsune-Motoko asked for a favor. "Can I please go to just one more place? Please!"



“Gosh, Kitsune, didn’t you have enough fun already?”
Naru asked.

“Not that. It’s to help someone!”

According to Kitsune-Motoko, a female friend was having trouble with her business. If she didn’t raise enough money on sales tonight, she would lose her club, and maybe her life, too.

“Then why didn’t you go straight to the club?” Naru asked.

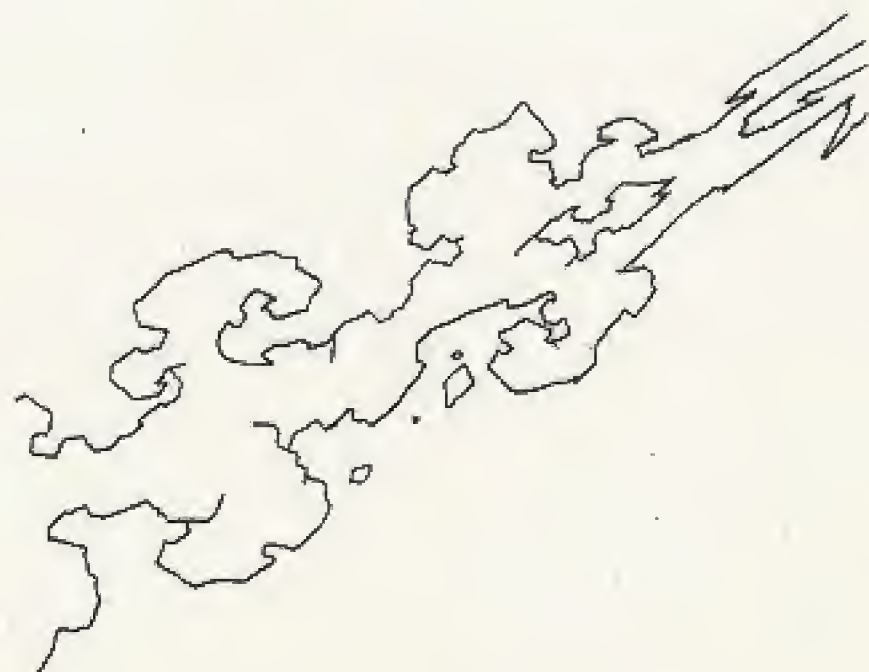
“Hey, I was in this tight, young body. I wanted to have some fun with it, you know?” Kitsune-Motoko said.

“I really don’t know about that,” Motoko-Kitsune remarked.

With a troubled look, Kitsune-Motoko pleaded, “Just one hour. If you can help me for just one hour, I’ll go back. Please?”

The other girls traded glances. “What should we do, Motoko?” Naru asked.

Motoko-Kitsune thought about it.



"Well, if a life is in danger," she said, "we cannot just ignore it."

"Right! That's what I would have said," Kitsune-Motoko beamed.

"So, Kitsune. What kind of place is it?"

"The name is Usagi to Kame."

"Kame . . ." Motoko-Kitsune muttered. She didn't like that name at all.

Usagi to Kame, on the end of the entertainment district, was an expensive looking club. The real name was Rabbit and Turtle but Kitsune just called it *Usagi to Kame*.

The sign had a rabbit and turtle on it, and for some reason, the turtle looked just like Tama.

"I'm hating this even more with every step," Motoko-Kitsune lamented.

"You're right about hating this place," Kitsune-Motoko said confidently.

"Eh?"

"All the customers are turtles," she explained.

"Wha . . . ?!"

"Just kidding. That's impossible."

"I'm going back," Motoko-Kitsune said angrily.

"Heeey! It's a joke, a joke!" Kitsune-Motoko teased.

"Please don't get mad!"



Naru smoothed it over by saying, "This might be an interesting place."

Kitsune-Motoko led them inside. The interior was very classy, with soft jazz music playing, but there were no customers inside. Not only that, but there weren't any employees, either.

"Gee, where did Mama go?" Kitsune-Motoko wondered.

"Hey, isn't this a letter for you?" Naru asked, indicating a memo on the far end of the counter.

Kitsune-Motoko read it and uttered, "Oh shoot!"

"What's wrong?"

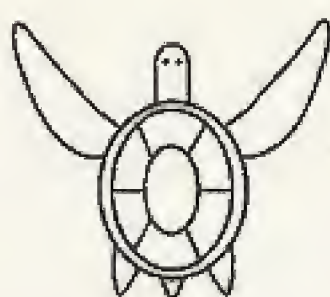
"Mama went home because no one came here tonight. At this rate, she might really commit suicide. Oh gosh."

"Well, if her life is on the line, then we'll have to do something," Motoko-Kitsune said. "Let's run the place tonight and see what we can come up with."

Naru blinked, surprised. She looked at Kitsune-Motoko. "I sure didn't expect her to say that . . ."



Motoko-Kitsune, now full of surprises, just chuckled.



Five minutes later, Motoko-Kitsune was almost in tears. "Are you crazy?!" she said. "I can't wear this!"

"It can't be helped," Kitsune-Motoko said. "These are the only uniforms available."

The item in question was a very skimpy Playboy Bunny outfit, cut low, easily a thousand times sexier than anything Motoko had ever dreamed of donning. Kitsune-Motoko finished zipping her up and twirled her around in front of the mirror.

"Eek!" Motoko-Kitsune cried, and covered her eyes. "I can't do this!"

"Well, it's that . . . or this!" Kitsune-Motoko said, hauling up a Tama-like turtle outfit, possibly used for parties or Halloween.

"I hate that one even more!" Motoko-Kitsune yelled.

"Then stop complaining and wear the bunny suit," Naru said, as she came out of the locker room with her bunny outfit already on. She wiggled, adjusting her cleavage. "It's tight in the chest . . ." she complained.

Kitsune-Motoko wolf whistled. "Naru you look great."



“Heh heh . . . I actually wanted to try on an outfit like this, at least once.” Naru giggled and wiggled her little tail.

She really looked great. Her fishnet stockings and firm breasts made her look more mature, yet the bunny ears gave her a playful quality. Even other girls thought that she was sexy. Heck, people in comas probably would, too. She could make plankton drool.

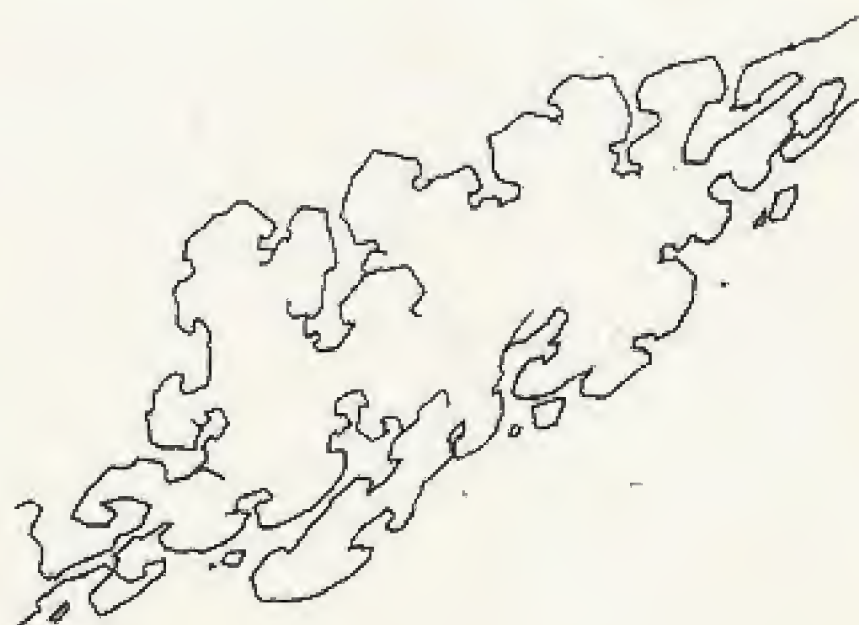
Kitsune-Motoko urged Motoko-Kitsune on. “Come on, Motoko. You know you wanna try it on, too,” she said. “Besides, it’s my body, so what are you worried about, right?”

“Eh . . .” It was a good point. Motoko-Kitsune didn’t have an answer for that.

“Besides,” Kitsune-Motoko added, “this place isn’t the sleazy kind that lets customers grab the employees. Maybe that’s why it does such lousy business. But I promise you’ll be all right.”

“But—”

“Think about it. You look like me now, Motoko. So there isn’t anything to be ashamed of.”



Motoko-Kitsune turned and caught a glimpse of her butt in the mirror . . . or rather, Kitsune's butt. She wiggled it. It looked pretty cute, she had to admit.

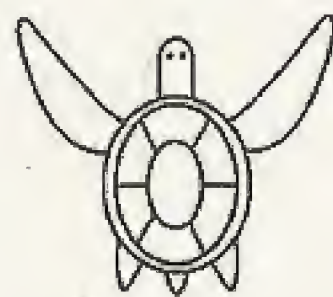
"Um," she said. "I guess . . ."

Motoko was ready, Kitsune knew. She needed one more push to make the move.

Kitsune leaned close and whispered in her ear, "*The Monthly Amore?*"

Motoko-Kitsune blushed and narrowed her eyes. "Okay, I'll do it," she said.

And so . . .



"Welcome!" The voices of the three girls rang out through the club. Motoko and Kitsune looked at each other.

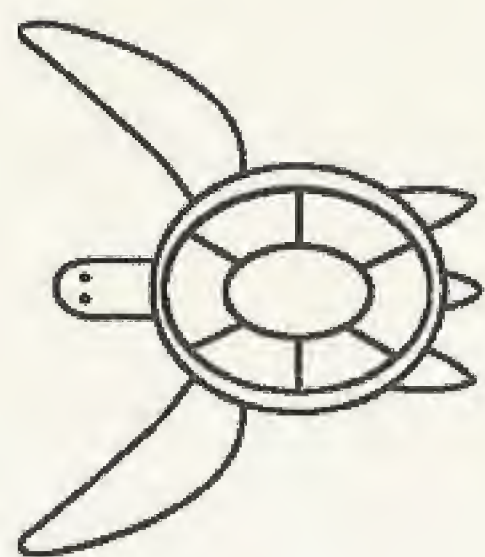
"Hey, I guess I don't look too bad," Motoko-Kitsune said.

"You look like a total stranger," Kitsune-Motoko teased.

"That's not true."

"Ha ha ha."

"Motoko, you're Motoko." Naru smiled, so Motoko and Kitsune smiled back. The red brass bell at the entrance rang, and the first customers arrived.



CHAPTER 6: THE BIG GROUP CIRCLE

Kitsune, still in Motoko's body, placed three fingers on the ground and bowed. She was clad in a white kimono and looked ethereally beautiful.

"Okay, I'm ready," she said.

Motoko, likewise in Kitsune's body, was also wearing a white kimono. She held a ceremonial sword. "Well then, let's begin," she said, more than a little nervous.

The futon was laid out in the middle of the room. The ritual table stood near the futon's pillows. On top of the table rested the sakaki tree branches. The Living Souls Exchange spell-breaking was about to begin.

The lights were turned off, and the girls' silhouettes were the only things visible in the darkened room. The



rustling of moving cloth and their stilted breaths were all that filled the silence, though Motoko swore she could hear their heartbeats.

They silently slipped out of their kimonos. Now completely naked, they climbed into the futon according to the ancient book's instructions, and then they each grabbed the sheath of the sword.

Those were the rigid steps of the instructions. The two girls, feeling slightly relieved that they'd managed to get it right so far, started to talk.

"This has been a very long day," Motoko-Kitsune whispered.

Kitsune-Motoko nodded. "I didn't think that the club would be that hectic," she said.

The Rabbit and Turtle club had overflowed with customers—owing in no small part to the fact that the girls had worn sexy bunny outfits. Some of the first guests had called their friends on cell phones and said, "There's some cute girls in this club," and the number of customers quickly doubled. As word spread, even more customers came, so the girls became extremely busy.

"Those kinds of clubs earn money from word of mouth," Kitsune-Motoko said. "That's why popular clubs stay successful and poor ones lose customers."



"Is that how it goes?" Motoko-Kitsune asked.

Kitsune-Motoko nodded. "Well, it's just like life, I guess," she said. "Successful people are always successful. Unsuccessful people are always out of luck."

This was not a happy thought for Motoko. "So unsuccessful people can't ever be successful?" she asked.

"No. Any person can come across a stroke of luck or two in their life. It's like making a bet. Maybe taking the college entrance exam is one of those chances."

Motoko-Kitsune thought about that. "Did you ever take that kind of chance, Kitsune?"

"Me? My chance . . . is now!"

Something rustled under the covers. Motoko-Kitsune felt something touching her, which was really weird, since it meant she felt her own fingers touching Kitsune's body, but she was the touch-ee rather than the touch-er.

"H-hey, what are you doing!" she said.

"I'm touching myself, silly," Kitsune-Motoko said. "I can do that to my own body if I want to."



"B-but . . . not when *I'm* you!" Motoko-Kitsune replied, squirming. Actually, it felt kind of nice. Motoko's fingers, guided by Kitsune's will, seemed very confident, way more experienced at this kind of thing than Motoko ever dreamed.

"Hey, Motoko," Kitsune whispered. "How about we two girls have some fun?"

"I-I don't have any interest in that," Motoko-Kitsune said, blushing.

"Just kidding." Kitsune-Motoko giggled.

"Eh?"

"It's a joke, dummy. Did you take me seriously?"

Motoko-Kitsune was confused now, and feeling all kinds of weird things. "I, uh . . ." she fumbled. ". . . I'm going to sleep."

"Don't get mad," Kitsune-Motoko whispered. "I'm sorry. Forgive me?"

"I can't."

"Then what can I do to make it up to you?"

Motoko thought about it. This crazy night, for all its scary moments, was actually kind of fun. Certainly wilder than anything she would ever have tried by herself.

"If I make it into college," Motoko-Kitsune asked, "will you take me out to party?"



Kitsune-Motoko smiled; her white teeth were visible even in the darkened room. "Sure!" she said. "I'll take you to a really great club."

"I look forward to that," Motoko-Kitsune said.

"Gotcha!" Kitsune-Motoko said gleefully. "I'm going to educate you on adult life. You might have a hard time of it at first, but . . . after being in your body today, I realized how hard it is to study for college. In that sense, I respect Naru, Shinobu, and even that stupid boy, Keitaro." She paused a moment. "And of course, I really respect you too, Motoko."

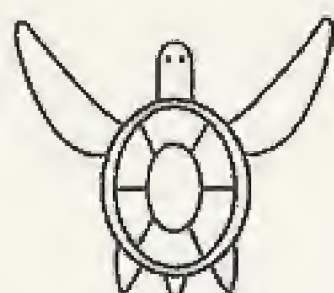
There was no reply. Only the sound of soft snores.

"Motoko, did you fell asleep already?"

But Motoko-Kitsune only snored in reply. Kitsune-Motoko snuggled up to her, then took her hand from under the covers and stroked Motoko's face . . . or rather, she stroked her own face.

"I'll live my life," she whispered. "Tomorrow I'll be back in this body, so please take care of it and rest well."





Motoko saw a nostalgic face in her dream.

“Motoko, how are you doing?”

Square glasses and ruffled hair. He was wearing dull clothes and laughing. He was goofy and awkward as always, but still . . . it was Keitaro.

“Urashima . . .”

“You’re studying to get into college, right? You’ll do fine, Motoko,” he said. “I’m sure you’ll get in.”

“Urashima, the college I’m trying to get into is . . .”

“I know,” he said. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

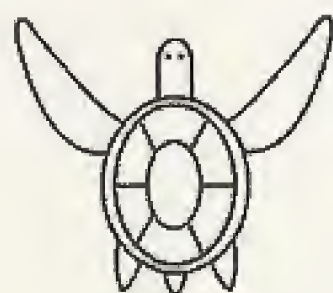
“Eh?”

“I’ll be waiting for you, okay?”

Motoko smiled and nodded. And when she ran to Keitaro, she jumped into his arms. Somehow, she *knew* that it was a dream. But at least in her dreams, she wanted to be true to her feelings.

She felt Keitaro’s warmth.

And inside her heart, she felt a warm spring breeze.





A few days after Motoko and Kitsune had returned to their respective bodies, the weather turned warm and sunny. Spring was just around the corner.

Naru swept the yard. Motoko smiled as she walked by.

"What's up? You seem to be in a good mood."

"I talked with Kitsune," Motoko replied. "I appreciated the thought, but I declined her offer to do the 'old switcheroo' with you to pass the entrance exam." She smiled as if a great load had been taken from her shoulders. "My chances of passing the exam by myself might be lower, but I want to see how far I can go on my own. I'll do my best."

Naru smiled at Motoko and nodded. "I agree with you," she said.

Motoko nodded back.

Naru thought about Keitaro during his study years. Then she realized, maybe Motoko was aiming for—

"Mail!" A young mailman cut off Naru's thoughts. She turned and accepted it.

"Thank you," she said.



Naru had received a postcard, but didn't recognize the woman's name on it. She looked on the backside and was startled.

"What's wrong, Naru?" Motoko asked.

Just then, Kitsune appeared. "What a great day!" she said. "It's a good day to gamble."

"Hey, Kitsune!" Naru seemed angry and glared at the cheeky fox.

Motoko tilted her head—she had no idea what was going on. "What's wrong?"

"This is from Rabbit and Turtle!" Naru replied. The postcard said that the club was hectic with so many new customers. It also said that the pay for Naru and the girls' work was already deposited into Kitsune's bank account.

"What money?" Naru asked.

"Oops! Th-that's . . . !" Kitsune went pale.

Motoko also closed in on her. "So the truth comes out. 'Mama' was never going to kill herself!"

Cornered, Kitsune blurted out, "I'll double the money and give it to you!" And then she fled.

"Ah! Kitsune!" Naru cried.

"Let's go after her!" Motoko suggested.

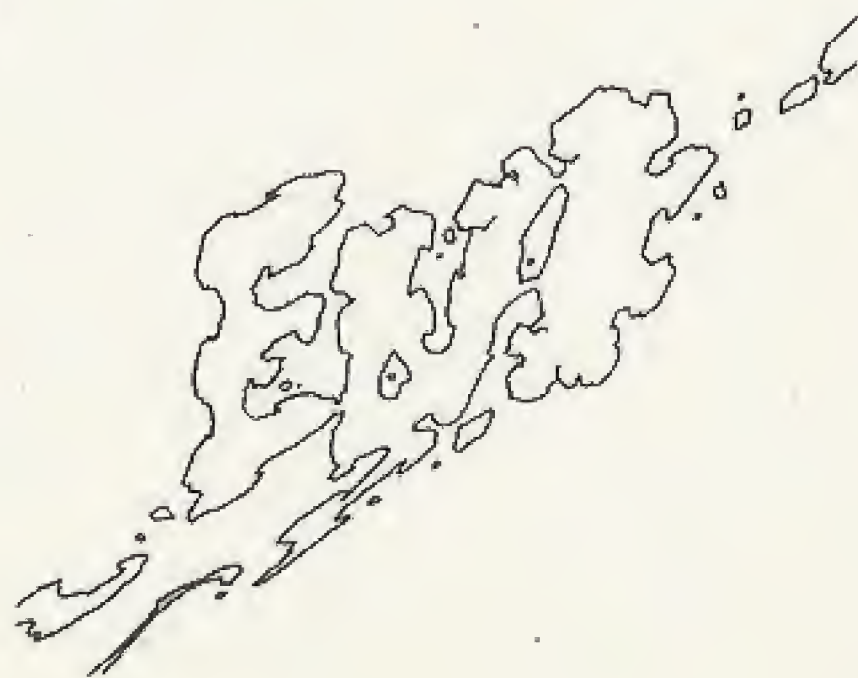
The two girls chased after Kitsune.

In the commotion, Naru dropped the postcard and it

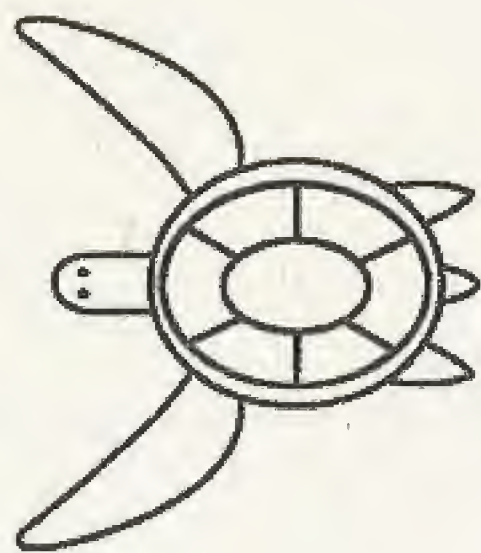


fluttered to the ground. On it was a photo of the three girls in bunny suits. Kitsune and Motoko stood beside Naru, making peace signs and laughing.

They both had great smiles.







CHAPTER 7: BAYSIDE CHRISTMAS

Tiny snowflakes were falling in the bayside town of Yokohama. The city was decorated with festive, twinkling lights, and the air was filled with the Christmas spirit.

The Hinata House residents were near the Marine Tower. It was all lit up and looked like a big candle, drawing the crowd's attention.

But Naru and the girls looked out to the bay, which was pleasantly illuminated by the city lights.

"So Urashima is on the other side of this ocean?" Shinobu asked, her breath puffing out into the cold air. She had tears in her eyes.

"I wonder if that idiot is doing all right," Sara said a little sadly.



"I wonder what sort of Christmas he's having," Suu said, looking far off.

"Knowing him, I'm sure he's not having much of a Christmas at all." Kitsune laughed, but she also looked a little depressed, in her own way.

"Maybe he forgot that it's Christmas," Mutsumi said, smiling as ever. Tama sat on her shoulder.

"Well, he is studying in the United States. Christmas is big there," Motoko answered, deliberately looking at anything other than Tama.

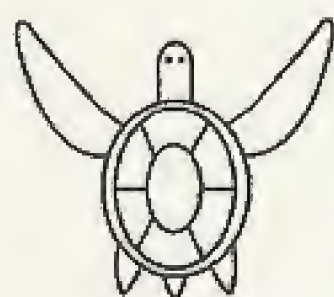
"It's getting cold, guys. Shall we go back?" Naru suggested.

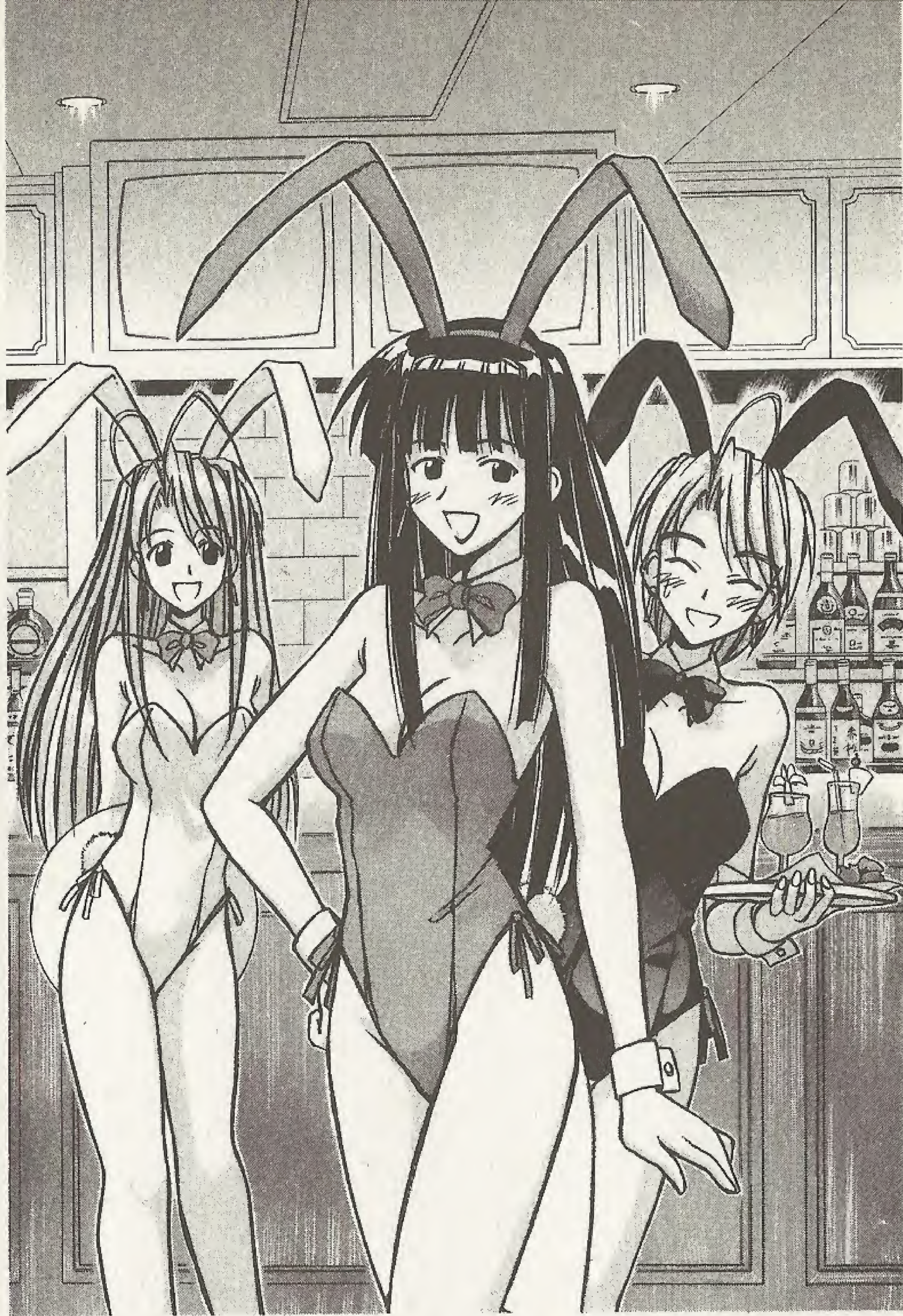
A large ferry nearby suddenly blew its horn, making everyone cover their ears.

Naru, looking back out to the sea, yelled, "Hurry up and come back, you pervert!"

She knew that when the little snowflakes in the air turned into cherry blossoms, Keitaro would return.

Somehow, that still felt like a long time to wait.



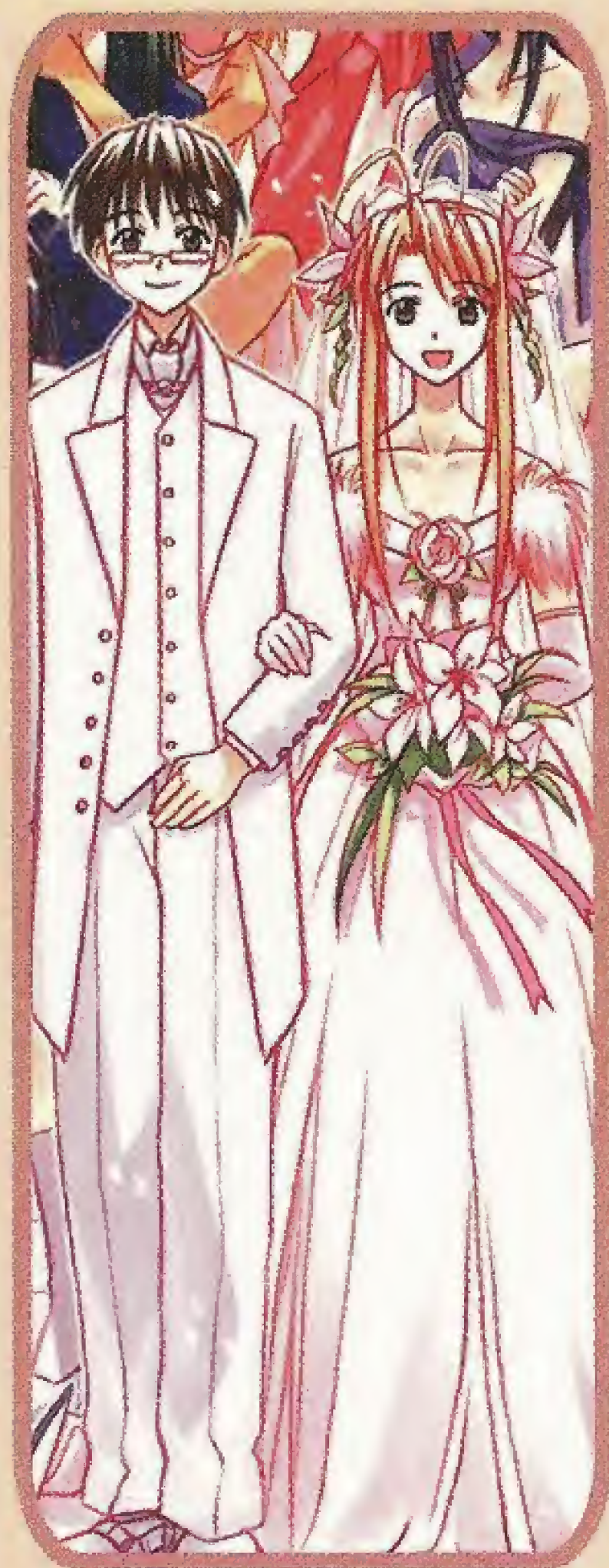


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When a crazy robot that looks exactly like Keitaro appears out of the blue at the Hinata House, the tenants of the all-girl dorm band together to fend off the out-of-control "Mecha-Keitaro."

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